

Sex & Society In Graeco-Roman

Montserrat, Dominic

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SEX AND SOCIETY IN GRÆCO-ROMAN EGYPT

DOMINIC MONTSERRAT



 **Routledge**
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LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1963 by
Kegan Paul International

This edition first published in 2011 by
Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 10: 0-7103-0530-3 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-7103-0530-5 (hbk)

Publisher's Note

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Acknowledgements

It is a pleasant duty to acknowledge all the friends who read and commented on sections of this book, provided interesting ideas for questions to discuss, and gave general support while I complained about writing: Richard Alston; Kate Chedg-zoy; Desbina Christoudoulou; Mike Davis; Joyce Filer; Jane Fisher; Matthew Fox; Rebecca Flemming; Lucia Gahlin; Matthew Leigh; Herwig Maehler; Elinor Mason; Jessica Maynard; Lynn Meskell; Penelope Murray; Burhan Tufail; Richard Parkinson; Geraldine Pinch; Jonathan Walters; Margaret Williamson. An even greater debt is owed to Catherine Alexander who tried to brush up my anthropology; Peter Davidson who translates so sensitively; Jane Stevenson, *doctissima puella*, who provided the drawing of Eros and Psyche in [Figure 14](#); Helen Whitehouse who provided the original for Plate 12; and last, though his contribution was the greatest, Terry Wilfong. In spite of all their help, any mistakes remain my own. Special thanks go to the eternally patient, helpful and courteous staff of the Institute of Classical Studies (Naomi Alvarez, Colin Annis, Joanna Ball, Paul Jackson and Susan Willetts), who dealt with all my unreasonable requests; to my co-workers in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Warwick University; and to my parents Angela and James who did all the things that parents are supposed to do when their offspring has a *crise de foie*. Many thanks indeed to Bram Calcoen who provided some of the excellent drawings, and all the institutions and individuals who were kind enough to give permission to reproduce photographs. At Kegan Paul, the editorial director Kaori O'Connor enthusiastically supported the work from its inception, and the editor, Carol Gardiner, saw it through the press. This book would never have happened without them. Postremo has litteras ad memoriam J.P.S., qui me impellit hanc opusculum conficere, dedicati sunt; *heac olim meminisse iuvabo* (Vergilius).

Conventions used in the Text

Chronology

All the dates given for the pre-Ptolemaic period, and some of those later, are approximate. Since little reference has been made to historical periods before the New Kingdom or the so-called ‘intermediate periods’ between the main historical divisions, only the broadest chronological suggestions have been given. The reigns of the Ptolemies have also been simplified, usually ignoring complex co-regencies, de-thronements and restorations. No Roman emperors between 235 and 284 CE are mentioned; this was a crisis period when the throne was frequently contested, and it would be otiose to list the numerous emperors. Those requiring further information are referred to E. J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (revised edition, London 1980).

Ar3100-2686 BCE
Old Kingdom
Middle Kingdom
New Kingdom
c. 1567-1108 BCE
c. 1192-1069 BCE
c. 1200-1085 BCE
Sa945-525 BCE
Pe525-332 BCE
332-301 BCE
Ptolemaic Period
301-282 BCE
282-246 BCE
246-222 BCE
222-205 BCE
205-180 BCE
180-145 BCE (expelled 163-4; restored)
145-116 BCE
116-107 BCE
107-68 BCE
68-64 BCE
64-58 BCE
58-55 BCE
55-47 BCE
47-30 BCE
30-19 BCE

477 BCE XIV
 36 BCE XV
 Roman Period
 30 BCE Judea
 14 BCE
 37 CE Caligula
 41 CE Claudius
 54 CE
 68 CE, Otho, Vitellius
 69 CE
 79 CE
 81 CE
 96 CE Trajan
 117 CE Hadrian
 138 CE Antonine Pius
 161 CE Aurelius
 180 CE
 192 CE
 192 CE, Didius Julianus
 193 CE Septimius Severus
 211 CE
 218 CE
 228 CE Alexander
 235 CE Emperors'
 284 CE Diocletian
 306 CE
 375 CE Emperors at Byzantium
 610 CE Invasion

Calendar

All dates are to before or after the Common Era (BCE/CE). In general, I have not given Julian calendar equivalents to Egyptian month names in the running text unless they are particularly important to the argument. In documents, years were usually dated by the regnal year of the current ruler, who was given a full honorific titulary. For instance, the full titles of Marcus Aurelius were Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antonius Augustus Armeniacus Medicus Parthicus Maximus. I have simplified these by referring to the simplest and most recognisable form of the name.

Several calendars and methods of designating the months were in operation concurrently in Egypt during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The most widely used in everyday contexts was a 365-day civil calendar, which consisted of twelve months of 30 days each beginning from I Thoth, plus five 'epagomenal' or 'intercalary' days. This was reformed in 238 BCE by the addition of a leap year day every four years to accommodate the uncounted quarter of a day. The Julian system of year reckoning was eventually adopted during the reign of Augustus, around 22 BCE. The following are the Egyptian

months and their equivalents in the Julian calendar:

~~Egyptian~~
~~28~~Abgust-27 September
~~28~~Septem-27 October
~~28~~Octo-26 November
~~27~~Novem-26 December
~~27~~Decem-25 January
~~25~~Februa-24 February
~~25~~Februa-26 March
~~25~~March-25 April
~~26~~April-25 May
~~26~~May-24 June
~~25~~June-24 July
~~25~~July-23 August
~~26~~August days

Weights, Measures, Currency

It is not easy to establish precise equivalents for ancient units of measurement, in part because there seems to have been considerable variance in the units themselves. The following list gives the standard approximate equivalents for measurements referred to in the text.:

~~land~~ measure, approximately 0.0275 hectares or 0.68 acres
~~artaba~~ dry measure, probably about 39 litres dry weight, equivalent to approximately 30 kilogrammes of wheat
~~chothix~~ dry measure, about one-fortieth of an artaba
~~length~~ measure of small distances, literally the distance between the elbow and the tip of the middle finger, notionally equivalent to approximately 47 centimetres or just over 18 inches
~~drachma~~ standard basic unit of currency, also used as a weight measurement (approximately 3.5 grammes)
~~currency~~ unit, 100 drachmas
~~obol~~ currency unit, officially one sixth of a drachma
~~stadia~~ measure of large distances, about 182 metres or 607 feet
~~talent~~ currency unit, 6000 drachmas

Monetary units make little sense without some comparisons, which have to be given in terms of purchasing power. About 40 artabas of wheat would have been enough to supply a family of five with bread for a year. Average prices for an artaba of wheat in the first and second centuries CE were around 8 drachmas, and a sharecropper could expect to earn about 20 drachmas a month. So subsistence for a family might, very roughly, be thought of in terms of an income of 320 drachmas per annum. There is a shortfall here of 80 drachmas, but family budgets would have been supplemented by various other sources of income.

Transliteration of Names

It is impossible to be entirely consistent about the transliteration of ancient names. In the text, Greek proper names have mostly been Latinised, especially familiar ones, hence Plato, Aeschylus and Oxyrhynchus instead of Platon, Aiskhulos and Oxurhunkhos. In transcribed words or passages of Greek, I have concentrated on making the words or passages comprehensible for those who want to check them in the original language. Hence I have used a circumflex to indicate long vowels: ê for eta and o for omega. Diacritics are omitted in transcribed proper names unless their absence would lead to a gross mistranscription of the word; so I have indicated the long final syllable of Nicê to show that the word is not pronounced as anglophones might expect.

Egyptian, Demotic and Coptic names and words are more problematic, since no generally accepted transcription system exists. I have made my transliterations as simple as possible, concentrating on rendering the consonant structure of the words recognisable to those wishing to use them.

Papyrological Conventions

Papyrologists have devised a comprehensive set of symbols to indicate the appearance of a papyrus, the extent of damage and editorial restoration, etc. For the sake of clarity in the text, I have just used [...] to indicate a break in the text of indeterminate length. A word in square bracket indicates that it is a supplement by the editor: so 'I knew another man, another [youth]' means that the word 'youth' is not present or fully legible on the papyrus, but seems a reasonable suggestion. Damaged words have not been bracketed when their restoration seems certain.

Ancient Authors

The titles of Greek and Latin works have all been translated into English: these should be self-evident. Ancient authors only known from one work, such as Herodotus and Juvenal, are referred to by name alone. Egyptian works, which by and large have no extant titles or known authors, are designated by the best-known titles in use. Translations from all languages are my own unless otherwise stated.

Fragments for a Sexual History of Græco–Roman Egypt

PAPYRA, throned upon the banks of Nile,
 Spread her smooth leaf, and waved her silver style.
 The sacred symbol, and the epic song,
 (Unknown the character, forgot the tongue),
 With each unconquer'd chief or stained maid,
 Sunk and undistinguish'd in Oblivion's shade.
 Sad o'er the scatter'd ruins Genius sigh'd,
 And infant Arts but learned to lisp and died.
 Till to astonish'd realms PAPYRA taught,
 To paint in mystic colours Sound and Thought,
 With Wisdom's voice to print the page sublime,
 And mark in adamant the steps of Time.¹

An eighteenth-century poetaster's attempt to versify Linnaean botany may seem a strange place to start a discussion of sexual life in post-Pharaonic Egypt. Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, published in 1789, is an odd piece: a didactic poem in 968 rhyming couplets about the intimate sex lives of humanised vegetables. The personified plants frolic about in their sylvan settings like figures in a Boucher engraving, flirting and playfully revealing themselves. Papyrus, 'in gay undress displays her rival charms / And calls her wandering lovers to her arms.' She then initiates the male plants into the art of love: 'Three favour'd youths, with fond officious care / Learn the strange process, and assist the fair.' But perhaps without even knowing it, Darwin had come upon something crucial for writing the sexual history of the past. Papyrus is uniquely, indeed immortally, informative. It can 'print the page sublime / And mark in adamant the steps of Time.' More importantly, the information papyrus preserves can revivify the lives of the forgotten dead, the 'unconquer'd chief, or sainted maid, / Sunk undistinguish'd in Oblivion's shade.' And the source of all this immortal information is an act of copulation, when Papyrus is fertilised by the male plants.

The Loves of the Plants was published only eight years after the first major scholarly edition of a papyrus text, and I do not know whether

Darwin himself was aware of it. But his taxonomic mind would certainly have appreciated that the pluralist society of Græco-Roman Egypt is a unique challenge to anybody who seeks to examine it. Egypt offers the historian a range of primary sources unparalleled from anywhere else in the ancient world. There are the enormous numbers of papyri and other textual materials that have been yielded up by abandoned town sites, rubbish dumps and even mummy cases, and preserved by the dry Egyptian climate. (See Plate 1.) Something over 30,000 texts have been published so far, and an indeterminably large number lurk in museum collections, still untouched by scholars. Their range is extraordinary, everything 'from mundane wage bills for labour on the road / to fragments of a long-lost Sapphic ode.'² These papyri are primarily in Greek, the official bureaucratic language of Egypt from the fourth century BCE when the country became part of Alexander's eastern Mediterranean empire, to be ruled after Alexander's death by his general, Ptolemy, and his descendants. When Egypt became a province of Rome after the defeat of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE, some Latin texts began to appear, though they were never numerous and Greek remained the *lingua franca*. The imported languages, however, never entirely supplanted the native Egyptian tongue, and both literature and documents continued to be written in Demotic, the penultimate phase of the indigenous language, during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

Papyrus was the most extensively used writing medium, but it was by no means the only one, and texts have survived from Egypt written on wooden boards, various types of animal skins, bones, reeds, mummy linen, and flakes of stone and potsherds, the latter two generically known as ostraca. Ostraca had several advantages over papyrus: not only were they free and immediately available, since one could pick up a piece of broken pot almost anywhere, but they could also be used in contexts where papyrus was inappropriate, such as for cloakroom tickets in the baths. Literature of all kinds is well represented among the papyri and ostraca, and this book will frequently refer to the literary record; but the majority of the texts are documentary, and they provide the principal materials for writing a sexual history of Græco-Roman Egypt.

A trickle of Egyptian papyri of the Græco-Roman period had been entering European collections since the eighteenth century. They were primarily treated as curiosities, though with the underlying hope that, once deciphered, a lost play of Euripides or ode of Sappho might come to light. The first Greek documentary papyrus text was edited in 1781 by the Dane, Niels Iversen Schow, but instead of revealing vanished literary treasures the contents turned out to be rather more prosaic — a list of men from the village of Ptolemais Hormou who were liable

for irrigation works maintenance at the Fayyum town of Tebtynis in 192 CE. The great era of papyrological rediscovery, however, began in the 1890s. In a begging letter to *The Times* of 26 June 1903, the pioneering papyrologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt gave an account of their earlier excavations at town sites in Middle Egypt. Their phlegmatic words belie the tremendous excitement they felt for their task:

After completing our excavations at Hibeh, we returned in February last to Behnasa, the ancient Oxyrhynchus, where in 1897 we were fortunate enough to find a large collection of Greek papyri. The work was confined on the present occasion to two large mounds, which were systematically cleared away down to the level at which the earth was too damp for the preservation of papyrus; and the success of our second excavations, which covered six weeks, was, in proportion to the time expended, not less marked than that of our first. Not only were documents of the first four centuries of the Christian era very numerous, but both mounds had been strewn with the *débris* of libraries of classical and theological writings.

Grenfell and Hunt, Classics dons from the Queen's College, Oxford, were primarily interested in literature, but the very personal evidence contained in some of the documents struck a chord in the popular consciousness, exemplifying current ideas of 'the human sympathy that makes the whole world kin.'³ A popular book of translated selections from Greek papyri,⁴ compiled in 1910 at the very beginning of their systematic study, captures well the reaction caused by these first publications of private documents:

The larger proportion [of non-literary texts] consist of official or semiofficial documents — such as the reports of judicial proceedings, petitions, census and property returns, wills, contracts and so forth. But there are in addition a large number of private letters which, like all true letters, are often of the most self-revealing character, and throw the clearest light upon the whole domestic and social relationships of the people. Not, perhaps, that their actual contents are often of any special interest. Their authors . . . are as a rule content to state the matter in hand as briefly and baldly as possible. At the same time it is impossible not to feel the arresting charm of these frail papyrus messages, written with no thought of any other public than those to whom they were originally addressed, and on that very account calling up before our

minds, as more elaborate documents could never have done, the persons alike of their senders and recipients.

For the same reasons, subscriptions to Greek documents detailing the physical appearance of the parties are constantly quoted by the early writers on papyrology. ‘Heraclous daughter of Ammonius, aged about 66, with a scar in the middle of her forehead. . . acknowledges to Tasoucharion daughter of Petermouthis son of Posidonius, aged about 60 with a scar in the middle of her chin and a mole at the left side of her nose . . .’ (P. Ryl. II 174). Papyrus documents like this were seen as enabling the modern reader to come face to face with the ‘living’ members of a dead society in a way which one papyrologist has recently compared to a Woolfian epiphany, almost a ‘moment of being’.⁵

For the late nineteenth century, then, the unique combination of written and visual sources from Egypt evoked the living bodies of real people. It did not take long for decadent *fin-de-siècle* writers to take the next step and discover the erotic potential of the papyrus fragment. The second chapter of Anatole France’s novel *Thaïs* (1890), the story of a prostitute who repents and becomes a saint, is entitled ‘Le Papyrus’. It narrates Thaïs’ first sexual experiences and early years in prostitution in a quasi-documentary style. France’s association of papyrus and eroticism is, I think, very interesting: he implies that papyrus is a mysterious and exciting source for exotic love secrets. Following France’s lead, the high-brow pornographer Pierre Louÿs stressed the role of papyri in his salacious works *Aphrodite* and *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (1894). The latter is a selection of sensual prose-poems with a Lesbian theme, purported to be translations from Greek texts found in the Egyptian tomb of a woman called Bilitis, who left her home in Pamphylia to have all kinds of sexy adventures, including one with Sappho. Pastiching contemporary archaeological accounts, Louÿs’s preface gives a loving description of Bilitis’ corpse, preserved by the magical process of mummification and surrounded by the texts of her erotic poems. His playful humour even made him append a fictitious bibliography of editions of the Greek text of her poems, citing the great classical scholar Ulrich Willamowitz-Moellendorf as one of the editors. And in the vanguard of Louÿs, Ezra Pound captured the enticing quality of the damaged fragment in his poem ‘Papyrus’, based upon a papyrus of Sappho:

Spring. . .
Too long . . .
Gongula . . .

So the first generation of writers exposed to collections of published

papyri (and many of them classically educated) saw the texts themselves as a vehicle for eroticism, either for what they might contain, or for what they might leave unsaid. For Louÿs, Pound and many others, papyri can give tantalising glimpses, like flesh seen through a torn garment; but no more.⁶

But if one wants to do more with papyri than conjure up a salon version of Græco-Roman Egypt, one must beware. Papyri present their interpreters with a unique set of problems. To begin with, a papyrus which has been screwed up or torn, thrown on a rubbish heap, covered with sand or mud, damaged by salt encrustation or damp and partially eaten by insects, presents some obvious difficulties of legibility and consequently of interpretation. The gaps in knowledge of the vernacular Hellenistic Greek in which they are written also produce difficulties, as do the handwriting styles in which they are transmitted. Documentary papyri are usually written in what are termed ‘cursive hands’, the rapid, abbreviated handwriting of daily life. Reading a papyrus can be like trying to reconstruct a damaged and incorrectly filled-in crossword puzzle from a foreign-language newspaper, with the section containing all the clues torn off. Even when the text is comparatively well preserved it is still easy to be misled. An example, perhaps relevant to a book about sexual life, is a second century CE private letter (P. Oxy. XII 1488)⁷ in an early volume of papyri published by Arthur Hunt. As Hunt edited the text, he put the following words into the mouth of the writer, a man called Sarapammon:

Write to me about how you are feeling, because I was thinking of coming home, but I put it off until I learned whether Isas is in love or not, and whether there is any need for me to come back.

A somewhat surprising reason for delaying an arrival, one might think, and taking the text at face value it would be tempting to speculate why. Was the writer a love rival of Isas, who had perhaps been jilted by somebody in favour him and was piqued at Isas’ success into staying away? The answer is rather more prosaic. The editor was misled by the position in the line of the sequence of Greek letters he had interpreted to mean ‘Isas is in love’, which is split into two groups by the right-hand margin and thus, to the unwary, looks like two separate words. In fact, the two letter groups constitute a single verb, meaning ‘you are well’, and the writer now expresses a very different sentiment:

Write to me about how you are feeling, because I was thinking of coming home, but I put it off until I learned whether you

are well or not and whether there is any need for me to come back.

Thus the modern editor is always coming between reader and writer, and the ancient texts speak only through the medium of contemporary subjectivity. The nature of the documentation from Egypt, and the randomness of its survival, compound the basic problems of reading, understanding and analysis, especially for the historian who is trying to piece together the sexual mores of a dead society. One cannot observe the actual daily sexual behaviour of men and women in Græco-Roman Egypt; virtually all the information must be inferred from the documentary record. In a sense, the problem of reconstruction is the same as that faced by the contemporary anthropologist conducting fieldwork, who must piece together patterns of behaviour from observation and responses which may be deliberately misleading or incorrectly interpreted according to the etic frame. Sexual behaviour is rarely observed directly, and responses are often couched in an idiom that make it hard to comprehend what is going on.

Take as an example the evidence of private letters on papyrus. From a modern perspective, one might think that letters on papyrus and other private documents would be a veritable treasure trove of insights into sexual life in all its manifestations, but in fact the opposite is true. Papyrologists may be scopophiles upon antiquity, people who enjoy reading other people's mail; but they receive very little gratification for their intellectual voyeurism. Most papyrus letters are formulaic, composed of epistolary clichés, enquiries after health and requests for commodities to be sent. Very few letters deal with sexual matters at all, and when they do it is usually in a discreet and allusive way, even when the letters are between married couples who are presumably engaged in a sexual relationship. This impression of something approaching a coyness about sex is apparently heightened by the fact that one only ever hears one side of the story, since one can but guess at what the letter's recipient knew about the situation. Reading a papyrus letter is like overhearing one side of a telephone conversation and, for the reasons already discussed, it is often a rather incoherent conversation at that. What, for instance, was the sexual scenario that lay behind a man called Serenus writing this letter (P. Oxy. III 528) to Isidora?

I want you to know that ever since you left me I have been in mourning, weeping by night and lamenting by day. Since you and I bathed together on 12 Phaophi I have not bathed or anointed myself for a whole month. You have sent me letters that could shatter a stone, so much have your words distressed

me. I wrote back to you immediately, and sent it on the twelfth with your letter enclosed. You say when you write, 'Colobus has made me into a prostitute,' but he told me 'Your wife sent you this message: 'It was he that sold my chain, and it was he himself who put me on the boat.'⁸

Is Serenus a distraught husband trying to persuade a wayward wife to come back to him? Or do the repeated associations of sex, money and commodity point to some other kind of sexual arrangement between Serenus and Isidora? Lack of knowledge of the other side of the story, and Serenus' bad Greek, make it unlikely that it will ever be known.

The distinguished scholar Claire Préaux, born at the turn of the century and thus a scion of the early generations of papyrologists, thought that 'les lettres privées découvertes parmi les papyrus donnent l'impression d'une société, sinon austère, du moins normale.'⁹ The key words are 'austère' and 'normale': she meant that, in her opinion, the society of Græco-Roman Egypt could be interpreted comfortably within her own frames of reference. In this way, the first editors of papyri seem to have been surprised at not finding such a thing as a love letter, a *billet-doux*, or even a passionate protestation of affection in the corpus of private letters, and contemporary editors still express surprise at this.¹⁰ In 1920, Grenfell and Hunt edited a third century CE letter (P. Oxy. XIV 1676) from Flavius Herculanus to a woman named Aplonarion 'couched in very affectionate terms,' and noted in their introduction that the writers tone 'is hardly that of ordinary friendship, and the letter is in fact the most sentimental that has yet appeared among published papyri.' (Herculanus' letter is quoted in full on page 102.) Nearly three-quarters of a century later, Grenfell and Hunt's comment still holds true: there are no love letters among the papyri. Of course, letter-writing and -reading in the ancient world were conducted under very different circumstances to today. Letters were often dictated in public to a third party, which could have had some moderating effect on more explicit statements, sexual or otherwise, and reading letters meant reading them out aloud. But in a sense it is a misnomer to call these texts 'private' letters at all, for this would imply that they are some kind of key to the locked world of the ancient 'private' individual. They were composed in a world with a very different notion of individuality. 'Private' letters were very much for public consumption; but should this necessarily dictate reticence in what Foucault termed 'societies of promiscuity', where existence is primarily carried on in public? In the same volume of papyri as the affectionate letter from Herculanus to Aplonarion, Grenfell and Hunt published a letter (P. Oxy. XIV 1761) exchanged between two women, from Callirhoë in Alexandria to Sarapias at Oxyrhynchus. The editors,

models of decorum, provided no translation but observed in the introduction that ‘a very singular symptom of regret for an absent friend is specified in lines 6—7.’ Apart from this one sentence, the letter is absolutely unexceptional, composed of the standard epistolary clichés, and the greetings sent to various other people show that this letter was intended to have its contents shared. It runs:

Callirhoë to her dear Sarapias, greetings. I say a prayer for you every day in the presence of the lord Sarapis. Since you have been away I go on the trail of your shit in my desire to see you. Greet Thermouthis and Helias and Ploution and Aphrodite and Nemesianus. Carabus and Harpocraton greet you, and everyone at home. I pray for your health.

How does one read Callirhoë’s ‘very singular symptom of regret’? Is ‘I go on the trail of your shit’ merely a vulgar colloquialism? Or is it perhaps an articulation of the organic nearness of excrement in the ancient world, a world where individuals were regularly given names like Copreus, ‘the one of dung’? Whatever was intended or meant by Callirhoë’s sentiment, her ‘private’ letter seems an unusually open expression of some strong feeling.

Recent work by scholars such as Paul Veyne has noted that a greater ‘individualism’ becomes manifest among élite groups in the late Hellenistic and early Roman worlds, an individualism which placed increasing emphasis on the nonpublic, with the person turning inwards to the private and the self, and not sharing publicly the things that are conceived of as essentially personal.¹¹ The Mediterranean world had expanded from one of small city-states to one of large empires, and consequently the individual, having shrunk in political and civic importance, became more self-absorbed.

The theory of introspection into an exclusive world might explain the sexual reticence of letters, but there are problems in applying it to the documentation from Egypt. Firstly, this shift from public to private was narrowly-based socially.¹² Secondly, there are societies where private life is central and positively valued, but where the individual, in Foucault’s terms as ‘an object of knowledge and a field of action’,¹³ is still undeveloped. I think that, to some extent, the latter was the case in Græco-Roman Egypt: sexual matters were certainly of importance to the people living there, but it was not a dichotomy between public and private which made a letter an inappropriate place to give expression to them. As shall be discussed later, the sources from Græco-Roman Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient world suggest that any single person’s identity and individuality was not primarily determined by his or her sexuality in the modern sense; and therefore while ‘personal’ or ‘private’ documents may occasionally

express powerful feelings, one should not necessarily expect them to record sexual activities in any detail. Sexual acts were presumably seen as natural functions on a par with eating and excreting and, as with sex, there are almost no explicit discussions of these in the documents. There are no evocations of the taste of food or the smell of excrement, so why should one expect any paeans to sex? In the Egyptian conceptual framework of boundaries as foci of danger, sexual activities are placed on the same level as food, faeces, blood and other body exuviae as tabooed phenomena. Also, if sexual acts could be a semi-public function (see [Chapter 4](#) below), contemporary ideas about the privacy of the act and thus of its expression will probably prove inapplicable.

The reader has already seen how the very vividness of the Egyptian documents led their first modern redactors and readers to view the people that produced them in an almost transcendental way: 'frail papyrus messages . . . calling up before our minds . . . the persons alike of their senders and recipients.'¹⁴ To the pioneer papyrologists of the late nineteenth century, which was also the great era of psychic research, papyrus letters were a sort of ectoplasm by which the dead could commune with the living. Because they can be conjured up scars, warts and all, the inhabitants of Græco-Roman Egypt seem very tangible, and therefore like ourselves: and, so the argument goes, if they are physically comprehensible to us, then they must *be* and act like us. Just because moderns express their most intimate thoughts and sexual desires in letters, it follows (wrongly) that the Egyptians should be expected to do so as well. This is the trap into which many writers on sexual matters in the ancient world have fallen: of thinking that the ancients constructed sexual experience in the same way as moderns do. The few studies to date¹⁵ of sexual behaviour in Dynastic and post-Pharaonic Egypt are certainly not blameless in this respect.

Apart from letters, what other kinds of documentary evidence have survived, and what can the student of the history of sexuality know from them? What can be known depends on interpreting the texts within the broadest possible model of what constitutes sexuality and how it functions within society: for instance, certain aspects of formalised sexual relationships between men and women are fairly well documented. Some marriage contracts provide a good deal of information about what constituted an ideal marriage, what the expectations and obligations of the partners were, and how they were expected to conduct themselves sexually. There are also deeds of divorce, though these are disappointingly reticent about the reasons for marital break-up.¹⁶ A slightly more fruitful source, particularly for events which seem to have undertones of sexual violence, are the petitions where plaintiffs voice their grievances to some higher

authority. For instance, in a Greek petition (P. Lond. VII 1976) from the Fayyum of 253 BCE, a widow called Aynchis, who ran a beer-shop, complains about her daughter's abduction by an agricultural worker who is already married with a family. Aynchis seems to be much more anxious about the adverse effect her daughter's absence might have on the business than about making any moral judgements on her behaviour, illustrating the general point that Egyptian society does not seem to have been too concerned about the sexual activity of unmarried people. Furthermore, although the vocabulary used is ambiguous, it might suggest that Aynchis' daughter contributed to the family's upkeep by selling sex as well as beer. The daughter's economic function is the primary one.

Other types of text, which might at first sight seem unpromising material, can be enlightening about the sexual status of individuals in society. For instance, much can be derived from a formulaic text like this wedding invitation (P. Oxy. XII 1579), written at Oxyrhynchus in the third century CE: 'Thermouthis invites you to dine in her house on the occasion of the wedding of her daughter tomorrow, that is the eleventh, at. . . o'clock'. The wedding is very much the daughter's day — there is no mention of the bridegroom. The venue of the festivities in Thermouthis' own home suggests the importance of women's involvement in the ceremony, and perhaps reflects the greater importance of marriage ceremonies as life-crisis rites for women, where their sexual maturity and potential reproductivity are formally acknowledged and publicly witnessed.

Magical texts, discussed in detail in [Chapter 8](#), are in some ways the most significant source. If some cataclysm had somehow destroyed all the documentary papyri and the only evidence for sexual life was the magical papyri, one might think that the Egyptians were preoccupied with sexual matters. Of the extant corpus of spells, coercion charms and other magical means of attaining the unattainable, a good third are concerned with sexual control in one form or another. They clearly reveal, in a way that no other kind of text could, a society capable of overmastering sexual obsession. It is a shame that Claire Préaux, who found Egyptian society so 'normale', left no *pensées* about the Greek and Demotic magical texts, which present a picture of love and sex with which she might have found more difficulty in coming to terms. These spells are where real sexual concerns are articulated, rather than letters or diaries. Their rhetoric, drama and social psychology give an understanding of sex and desire in the minds of ancient lovers different from any other material.

The value of the textual information for a study of sexuality is further limited by the dictates of the land. A large proportion of the texts come from two main areas: the prosperous agricultural

communities in the Fayyum oasis (e.g. Tebtynis and Karanis) and the large provincial towns in Middle Egypt (Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis, Antinoopolis). Different climatic conditions mean that there is comparatively little documentation from the Delta or from the great capital Alexandria; and there were differences in the sexual mores of all these places, depending on economic and marital status, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. It is as though some future historian, writing a study of sexuality in late twentieth-century England, were to have as the only primary sources a chance selection of the flotsam of household waste-paper baskets from some well-to-do coastal towns in Sussex, and the discarded archives of various council offices in Birmingham, with virtually no evidence from London. The nature of habitation in Egypt, with most settlements being confined around the narrow strip of cultivable land bordering the Nile, ensures that the same settlements tend to be continuously inhabited, and therefore very few town sites have survived. Those that have survived have not, by and large, been excavated thoroughly or well.¹⁷ Consequently there are few urban graffiti, which in any literate society provide such a wealth of information about the mechanics of sex, and very little in the way of erotic drawings or wall-paintings. Modern views of the forms of erotic life at Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum would be very different without the famous brothel paintings and graffiti, that most public form of sexual iconography, which record such sexual vignettes as 'Apelles the waiter dined most pleasantly with Dexter the slave of the Emperor, and they also had a screw together.'¹⁸

So far, this discussion has focussed on the Greek texts, and their usefulness for writing sexual history. Using the Demotic literary and documentary texts as such raw material is even more problematic.¹⁹ The perceived difficulty of reading the Demotic script, the problems with the language itself, and papyrologists' traditional privileging of Greek over Egyptian material, have all led to comparatively few Demotic papyri being published, although there are large numbers awaiting publication. Like the Greek texts, the Demotic material is unevenly distributed geographically and chronologically, with a large concentration of material from the Fayyum and dating to the second century CE. The main difficulty lies in assessing exactly who was reading and writing in Demotic, especially in the Roman period. Many of the more informative Demotic texts would probably have had a religious origin, among hereditary communities of priests. True, there are numerous Demotic papyri and ostraca detailing the activities of non-priestly individuals, but these tax receipts, name lists and accounts do not tend to be very useful for the historian of sexuality. Consequently one must be careful about making too many generalisations from the Demotic material produced by and for a

distinct class, reflecting the interests of that class rather than those of society at large. Yet some Demotic literary texts continued to be copied, recopied and even translated into Greek, and new texts were being composed within the traditional frameworks and modified, which suggests some sensitivity to their changing environment.

This, then, is the rag-bag of written evidence: literature, magic spells, and other textual material recording information about marriage, divorce, adultery, prostitution, rape, abduction and so forth – a series of different and mutually independent facets of a society all of which variously employed sex and sexual meanings, but were not necessarily organised ‘as sectors within a single field labelled sexuality, and were not enacted by human beings whose individuality was crucially determined by their sexuality.’²⁰ The Greek and Demotic papyri and ostraca generally record a particular and restricted kind of information which is not *prima facie* very informative about what might be termed the nuts and bolts of sexual life. The only aspects of sexual behaviour which appear are those which produce written documentation. It is too random a series of data to be conducive to any kind of statistical analysis, nor can it be used to make broad generalisations about conditions that prevailed throughout Egypt. An isolated document can tell you only about the environment that produced it.

This welter of written evidence is in marked contrast to the sources for sexuality in the Pharaonic period, which are principally archaeological and iconographie and from funerary or religious contexts, whereas from the Græco-Roman period they are overwhelmingly textual and from domestic or official contexts. Pharaonic material also represents a much narrower social range: a certain amount is known about the élite tomb-owning class, but little about urban and rural dwellers in other places.²¹ From Græco-Roman Egypt there is, of course, some evidence for sexuality in the material culture, such as votive figurines from shrines, and tomb offerings to ensure the sexual vitality of the deceased, but not in such abundance as from before. The papyri and the scanty material culture, along with the few (and problematic) references to matters sexual in Egypt provided by classical authors such as Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Clement of Alexandria, Juvenal and others, form the backbone of the documentation. However, these provisos about the nature of the evidence do not mean that the sources are uninformative about sexuality as long as sexuality is constructed in its widest sense. The people of Græco-Roman Egypt may not say very much about sex *qua* the genital functions of the human body — ‘organ-grinding’ – but they have plenty to say about sexuality if it is thought of in terms of a complex of reactions, interpretations, definitions, prohibitions and

norms that is created and maintained by a given culture, and, just as importantly, something that can only be understood in relation to the entire anatomy of the society under scrutiny. Of course, the sexual practices of another time or place are intrinsically interesting for the reader as historical voyeur, but they can potentially be very useful for interpreting society. For Græco-Roman Egypt, the study of sexuality is particularly interesting because of the interplay of cultures with different attitudes to sex and sexuality that took place there. There is the intriguing possibility that private life, in common with other aspects of society, was manipulated to maintain an ethno-cultural dichotomy. Did sexual practices, particularly in the Roman period, constitute any kind of cultural index? Recent studies of the Egyptian phenomenon of brother-sister marriage suggest that this may indeed have been the case.²²

The inhabitants of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt inherited an amalgam of laws, traditional values, and customs formalising relationships between the sexes which had originally varied considerably according to ethnic background. The first Greek settlers brought with them a concept of marriage determined by their notions of honour and transferred shame: that a woman's sexual behaviour had repercussions for the men connected with her, and for the entire social unit to which she belonged. Wives were expected to be faithful: men could commit adultery, though socially sanctionable adultery was confined to lower-status women, such as slaves and prostitutes or young males at particular stages in their lives, not the respectable wives of other men. These attitudes were reinforced by a restrictive body of law, in which women had very limited legal potentiality. All this underwent some modification when it came into contact with the prevailing legal and moral climate in Egypt, however. As will be discussed in [Chapter 4](#), Egyptian ideas about relationships between the sexes do not seem to have been primarily motivated by the same notion of female shame leading to public male dishonour. The unmarried men among the first Greek settlers in Egypt often married local women, and deprived of the familiar and comforting ambience of their home town or city, tended to assimilate to local standards of morality and behaviour. This gradual shifting is well exemplified by the family of Dryton, a Cretan cavalry officer who settled at Pathyris (modern Gebelein), south of Thebes, in the mid-second century BCE. By his second wife Apollonia, who seems to have been of mixed Greek and Egyptian descent, he had five daughters, and Apollonia was herself from a family of four sisters. Sarah Pomeroy has pointed out that large families of daughters are extremely rare in the ancient world, in part perhaps due to widespread female infanticide, and would certainly have caused 'acute embarrassment to almost any

Greek man'.²³ On the other hand, the Egyptian custom of rearing all their children, including the females, caused considerable surprise to observers from the Greek world, such as the geographer Strabo.²⁴ In fact, the exposure of unwanted children, male as well as female, was certainly practised in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. It is not known exactly who observed the practice, but there is no reason to suppose that it was a possibility that was closed to Apollonia and Dryton in regulating the size of their family.²⁵ One can but guess at what motives led them to rear all their daughters, and whether the fact that they did so can really be seen as a modification of Greek custom in response to Egyptian societal pressure. It may be significant, however, that apart from Apollonia and Dryton's daughters, there are only two other examples of families of five girls known from the Greek world, and one of these is again Egyptian, though from a very different milieu: the five daughters of the Alexandrian philosopher Diodorus Cronus. (The other is the family of the classical Athenian statesman Themistocles, who perhaps decided to bring up the girls as a symbol of his own wealth and status.) As a result of this apparent Egyptian influence, the forms of marriage and family life among Greek settlers began to take on an increasingly Egyptian flavour, and by the late Roman period the possible influence of Roman institutions, habits and attitudes also has to be taken into account. The subject here is Egypt the palimpsest, where successive layers of partially erased writing are still faintly legible through each other.

From this, it is clear that some justification is required for using the term 'Græco-Roman Egypt' at all. Was there ever really an Egypt when Greek, Roman and indigenous elements fused into a syncretic whole in conformity with the Hegelian notion of thesis + antithesis = synthesis? As an historical concept, 'Græco-Roman Egypt' is meaningless, if not actually misleading and dangerous, because it connotes some kind of political and social continuity. The *plus ça change* idea of a quintessential, eternal Egypt is a trope among historians and travel writers alike. The novelist Amelia B. Edwards saw the Egyptian peasants of 1873 'wearing the same loincloth, plying the same shaduf, ploughing with the same plough, preparing the same food in the same way and eating it with his fingers from the same bowl as did his forefathers of six thousand years ago.'²⁶ It is a truism that many things about life in Egypt have remained the same whoever was in power, but Egypt was not a static society, and sexual mores changed along with (and in response to) other factors such as immigration, government and religion. The period of six centuries between c. 323 BCE and c. 295 CE encompassed immense social upheavals and ideological changes, from the onset of Hellenism to the beginnings of Christianity, and does not constitute any kind of unity.

Roman rule does not seem to have been a continuum of Ptolemaic policies, but to have brought in many innovations which approached a Romanisation, at least in the towns. To be on more secure ground, the historian has traditionally limited the period of enquiry to chronologically discrete units: the Ptolemaic period, or Egypt under Roman rule.²⁷ There is, however, still much to be gained from looking at the extended picture of a 'Græco-Roman Egypt,' as long as one realises the term does not constitute a political entity, but is merely a piece of historian's shorthand. One can argue forever over the extent of cultural interaction, assimilation or penetration between Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, but all that needs to be acknowledged is that there existed a pluralist society in Egypt which at various times and places could include Greek, Roman and Egyptian elements: a Græco-Roman Egypt, of sorts. Analysing a wider time period during which many changes took place enables one to map both constants and changes, and ask questions about how and why they came into being, thus coming closer to the heart of Egypt's uniqueness.

The Notion of Sexuality in Græco-Roman Egypt

He brings the flood
Bounding up as he copulates
As man copulates with woman
Renewing his manhood with joy . . .
Happy embraces the field
An embrace that fills each nose with life;
For when embraced, the field is reborn!²⁸

Many books on Egypt have begun with variations on the often-quoted aphorism of Herodotus that 'Egypt is the gift of the Nile'; but what engenders the Nile itself, the engenderer? This excerpt from a Ptolemaic stela on the island of Sehel in the cataract region, down in the south of Egypt where the first signs of the coming inundation were observed, gives one idea: the Nile flood, personified as the fertility god Hapy, embraces the land of Egypt like a lover and impregnates her. Thus the regenerative force of the Nile, without which the land of Egypt would be unproductive and uninhabitable, is analogised to the sexual act — illustrative of the fundamental importance of both in the Egyptian view of their own world. Sex was inextricably woven into the whole fabric of society and the rhythms of life and regeneration. But this is not to say that the inhabitants of Græco-Roman Egypt would have seen sex as something so definitive or capable of such easy demarcation as it is in the late twentieth century. Even the potent Nile with his fertilising phallus is sometimes represented as a

hermaphroditic god with female breasts (see [Figure 1](#)). Of course they were well aware that the sex act was responsible for their own existence, but the extent to which they, or indeed any other ancient society, saw sexuality as being the principal means of identifying themselves is rather more problematic.



Figure 1 The god of the Nile flood with pendulous breasts. (After Lindsay 1965)

Any discussion of the actualities of sexual life in Græco-Roman Egypt must be prefaced by some consideration of more general questions of how people and modes of behaviour have been categorised according to the shifting criteria of gender and sexuality. After all, the norms, practices, and definitions of what constitutes sexual activity are highly culturally specific. There is now an increasing corpus of writing about sex in the ancient world. Much of it inspired by the work of the late Michel Foucault, who argues that sexuality is a modern, or at least comparatively recent, construct. Foucault's work on the ancient world has not been accepted without

reservation by scholars.²⁹ However, his model of constructed categories seems to me to be helpful in trying to analyse sexuality in a complex pluralist society like that of Græco-Roman Egypt and, with some exceptions, it is the one that I have adopted throughout this book. It may be unwise to graft a model based on Greek and Roman norms onto Egypt where, as I have suggested, classical ideas about sex modified on coming into contact with the strong indigenous culture. Indeed, I do not believe that one should look for a central, monolithic 'attitude' to sexuality in the ancient world: the picture must have been more diverse and complex than that. But certain features about ancient sexuality seem to remain more or less constant. In a recent article,³⁰ Helen King has isolated several areas of sexual life where ancient and modern concepts radically diverge. First, and most crucially different, is that underlying the expression of sexuality there is a notion of inequality in all relationships. Secondly, there is an acceptance of male homosexuality as long as it takes place within certain boundaries. Closely bound up with both of these in the central importance of penetration: who penetrates and whom is penetrated is the most important determination in any sexual relationship.

The manifestations of sexual behaviour, then, are highly individual, and can provide an index to the uniqueness of a given society. Sexual activity may be taxonomised not only according to the gender of the partner, but also according to the roles she or he plays. In classical Athens, for instance, the most common paradigm for sexual contact between male citizens seems to have involved a significant age discrepancy. Only for the junior partner was it seen as acceptable to play a passive role — to be the object of desire — and then only at certain stages of life and in strictly demarcated ways. At different stages of their lives, both partners in this kind of homosexual relationship would also have sexual relations with women, even if the primary intention of this was to produce future citizens to repopulate the city or *polis*. Emotional investment lay in other areas of the citizen's life. This is not to say, however, that the peers of these Athenian citizens would have been as anxious as moderns are to place them in the bisexual category. For them, far more significant demarcators were the divisions between lover and beloved, between penetrator and penetrated, and the divisions between the kinds of behaviour appropriate to each role. The bifurcation now cleaved between heterosexual and homosexual, with bisexual uneasily straddling this duality, is certainly not the only classification possible.

The importance of the social roles allotted to each sex sets up one fundamental difference between ancient and modern ways of thinking about sexuality. Sexuality has become centralised in the twentieth-century mentality, partly because of the work of Freud and his

interpreters. The partitioning of individuals into (arbitrary) pigeonholes on the basis of their choice of sexual partner has an underlying assumption that sexuality expresses something fundamental about a person's identity and reveals some inner, private truth about that person. Sex is knowledge: the sexual sense of the verb 'to know' did not come about through the prudery of Biblical translators. Questions such as 'Are you gay?' or 'He's straight, isn't he?' enable contemporary enquirers to place the respondent in a category on the basis of the answer, and thus to know something about him or her. Now, everybody has a 'sexuality', and can be stratified on the basis of it. But even if it were possible to speak to the inhabitants of Græco-Roman Egypt, it would be very difficult to pose them such questions. There is no Greek or Egyptian word for 'sexuality', and to ask an ancient, for example, 'Are you gay?' would have necessitated using vocabulary which had more implications for social than sexual status.

Following Foucault, David Halperin theorised that 'sexuality, according to the stronger argument, is a specifically modern production, a way of understanding experience (and therefore a way of experiencing) that is appropriate to a highly differentiated, industrialised and modernised society. We now live, so the argument goes, with a model of personality centred on sex.'³¹ Sexual behaviour in the ancient world, then, could be regarded not as an expression of or key to the innermost self of an individual, but as an index to his or her social role and public potentialities. If one appreciates the idea that sexuality in the ancient world was a definition of public status rather than private self, a statement like this prayer from Chapter no of the so-called *Book of the Dead* acquires a meaning beyond that of the mere desire for the replication of this world in the next:

May I eat there and drink there; may I plough and reap there; may I fight and copulate there; may my words be mighty there; may I never serve as a slave there, but be ever in authority.

An even more illuminating example of this divergence between ancient and modern assumptions about sex can be found in their very different approaches to the interpretation of dreams. Freud believed that 'dreams themselves are among the manifestations of suppressed material... the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. By analysing dreams we can take a step forward in our understanding of the composition of that most marvellous and mysterious of all instruments.'³² Practitioners of the trade of dream interpretation in the ancient world, however, would probably have found Freud's ideas

difficult to comprehend. For them, the principal interest of dreams was not as keys to the dark recesses of the dreamers' psyche, but as possible indicators of what the future held in store for them. Therefore the ancient dream analyst would have arrived at very different explanations of dreams with an obvious sexual content to that of the Freudian interpreter. I shall take as an example the appropriately Freudian dream of a man sleeping with his mother. 'According to Freudian principles, overt and successful incestuous dreams ought not to exist; such sexual desires are so shocking that they should never pass the dream censor.'³³ The dream interpreter Artemidorus of Daldis, however, writing in the second century CE, dealt with such dreams symbolically. They are particularly appropriate for public figures, he says, because a mother signifies one's native country, so that sexual domination of her body indicates taking control of the affairs of the city.³⁴ This idea is certainly not an oneiromantic innovation of Artemidorus. In the fifth century BCE, Herodotus had related the story of how the deposed tyrant of Athens, Hippias, dreamed that he was sleeping with his mother, which he took to mean that he would regain control of his home city.³⁵ Almost two millennia earlier, an Egyptian dream interpretation manual suggested meanings for the same type of dream apparently based on similar sympathetic principles: '(Should a man see himself in a dream) copulating with his mother, good; it means that his family will remain faithful to him.'³⁶

How do later Egyptian dream texts deal with sexual dreams, and what can these interpretations say about contemporary notions of what would now be termed the sexuality of individuals? For the Græco-Roman period there are two main sources of information. Firstly, there is a fragmentary dream interpretation manual, written in Demotic at some time between 100–200 CE, and now in Copenhagen;³⁷ this will be discussed below. Secondly, there are the records of the dreams of Ptolemaios, who went off to be a voluntary recluse or *katochos* in the sanctuary of the Serapeum at Memphis in about 172 BCE. He wrote down his dreams in both Greek and Demotic on a number of papyri and ostraca.³⁸ The fact that some of the dreams are numbered probably suggests that he wrote them down in order to take them to a dream interpreter for analysis.³⁹ Indeed, at Saqqara in the early Ptolemaic period, a Cretan dream interpreter set up a stela to advertise his trade, its inscription written in halting iambic trimeters. 'I interpret dreams (*enhypnia*), having the command from the god. With good fortune. He who interprets here is a Cretan.'⁴⁰ The Greek word used for dreams on the stela, *enhypnia*, is significant. The professional dream expositors drew a distinction between different types of dreams, especially between *oneiroi* and *enhypnia*. *Oneiroi* were predictive dreams, but *enhypnia* were of little use in interpreting the

future, because they are indicative of the present state of affairs as reflected in the dreamer's mind.⁴¹ Thus the category of *enhyponia* can encompass anxiety and wish-fulfilment dreams, and also *phantasmata* or apparitions. Maybe one is to imagine Ptolemaius taking his dreams to just such a practitioner for analysis.

The dreams of Ptolemaius, particularly the ones he recorded in Demotic, would seem to offer a fertile ground for Freudian interpretations which assume a sex-based model of the dreamer's personality. The contemporary reader of Ptolemaius' dreams, with a well-developed notion of the subconscious, finds it difficult not to be struck by the familiar dream images for sexual acts, such as falling from a height, eating, and forcing one's way into a cavern:

First (dream). He tells as follows: I saw a woman. She was running towards a precipice but I restrained her by shouting 'Stop!' She was there at home with her husband and sons and she was at ease. I found some bread and some fruit and I ate them.

Second (dream). He tells as follows: I saw a tomb in a valley, the façade of which was laid open. It had been desecrated, and I inhabited it. I saw a woman and I was making love with her. I gave her a few pieces of twig and some sweets to Horudja, her son. I spoke with the woman and said to her, 'Phatres' wealth is now yours since he has committed suicide.'⁴²

Several of Ptolemaius' dreams have a more explicit sexual content, often concerning the young twin sisters Tawe and Djehutirdis, who were friends and protégées of his as well as being ritual workers in the Serapeum. One dream Ptolemaius recorded in Demotic goes:

First (dream). I was walking on the approach to the temple of Serapis with a woman called Tawe, a virgin. I speak to her as follows: 'O Tawe, are you perhaps perplexed because I have made love with you?' And she replied: 'It will be hard in dealing with my sister Djehutirdis, if they tell her . . . and I have gone upstairs to (see) her (?)'⁴³

The dreams that Ptolemaius recorded in Greek talk of his relationship with the twins in similar terms. Here he calls them Thauos and Taous, the Hellenised versions of their Egyptian theophoric names:

At once I saw one of [the twins] go to a dark place in someone's house, and she sits down and urinates. And

immediately I saw that the other of them had been sitting off to one side ... I also saw much more, and I again implored Serapis and Isis, saying, 'Come to me, goddess of goddesses, be gracious and hear me — pity the twins! It was you who ordained them to be twins. Release me from temptation, for behold! I am an old man, and I know that I shall shortly come to an end. But they will become women, and if they are defiled they will never be clean again.'⁴⁴

Dorothy Thompson has noted of Ptolemaius' dream diary that 'the modern reader of these dream texts interprets them in a contemporary idiom. Taous [= Tawe] is a sexual tease; there is the danger that her twin Thaues [= Djehutirdis] may be pregnant.'⁴⁵ One wonders what Dr Freud would have made of Ptolemaius' micturition dream about the sisters: perhaps that Ptolemaius had a subconscious desire to impregnate one of the girls (or both, since they are twins and thus a unity) on the Freudian analogue of urine = semen = amniotic fluid.⁴⁶ From what has already been seen of ancient methods of dream interpretation, one might guess that the construction placed on such dreams by contemporary interpreters would probably have been very different. The best-preserved Demotic dream interpretation handbook, probably copied (though not necessarily composed) in the second century CE and thus roughly contemporary with Artemidorus, suggests how dreams such as those of Ptolemaius might have been analysed in Egypt. This dream manual divides dreams up thematically, according to their content, and then subdivides them further according to the gender of the dreamer. Thus there is one section on the significance of dreams about beer, another on dreams about garlands, on dreams about swimming, and so forth. The least damaged column of the Copenhagen dream manual is the one attempting to explain the sexual dreams of women, mostly about intercourse with various creatures, both animal and human. This section is entitled 'The different types of intercourse about which people dream: what they signify when a woman dreams about them', and the damaged text then continues

If a woman (dreams) that she is married to her husband, she will be destroyed; if she embraced him, she will come to grief. If (she dreams of) a mouse having intercourse with her, her husband will give her [. . .]; if a horse is having intercourse with her, she will deal violently with her husband; if a [. . .]-beast is having intercourse with her, a peasant will give [her . . .]; if an ass is having intercourse with her, she will be punished for a grave sin, and she will [...]; if a goat is having intercourse with her, she will soon die; if a ram is having

intercourse with her, Pharaoh will do something to her benefit; if a [. . .]-beast is having intercourse with her, a miserable fate will find her, if a wolf is having intercourse with her, a craftsman will do something to her benefit; if a lion is having intercourse with her, she will see something good; if a crocodile is having intercourse with her, she will soon die; if a snake is having intercourse with her, she will take a husband who will be strict with her (and) she will grow ill; if a baboon is having intercourse with her, she will do a good deed for people, but they will not [...].

If an ibis is having intercourse with her, a house that is fully equipped will become hers; if a falcon is having intercourse with her, a [. . .] fate will happen to her and her house; if a [. . .]-bird is having intercourse with her, a female opponent will receive possession (of the house?).

If a married woman is having intercourse with her, a miserable fate will find her, and a child of hers will [die?]; if a foreign enemy is having intercourse with her, she will take her husband and they will be found dead; if a Syrian is having intercourse with her, she will weep because she will cause her slave to have intercourse with her; if a foreigner is having intercourse with her, she will weep because she will bear false witness and will be sexually available (?) to everyone who comes to her, and her husband will take another woman as spouse; if one unknown is having intercourse with her, she will be sought but she will not be found.⁴⁷

In a discussion of Artemidorus, Simon Price⁴⁸ rightly points out that the interpreter does not differentiate the meanings of the dreams according to the status of the dreamer, as in some other manuals from the ancient world. Some of the dreams are specific to women, such as the one about her dreaming of sex with her husband, but the meanings of most dreams in the Demotic *oneirocritica* are determined by the biological gender of the dreamer. This is in accordance with earlier Egyptian divinatory practices: a manual of New Kingdom date seems to distinguish the meanings of the dreams of men according to the appearance or complexion of the dreamer. Thus a man's dream about having intercourse with an ass would probably have had a quite different meaning from when his wife had the same dream. This is not to say, however, that this Egyptian interpreter of the sexual dreams of women was uninterested in what they might have to say about the woman's social rather than her sexual status. It is noticeable that the last sequence of five dreams, dealing with what one might term 'adulterous' dreams where the woman dreams of sex with someone

who is potentially dangerous or otherwise not socially sanctionable (another woman, foreigners) are all explained in terms of a future physical calamity or a diminution in the woman's status. It may also be significant that these sexual dreams are potentially realisable: it is quite possible that a woman might have sex with a foreigner, or another woman, but it is intrinsically unlikely that she will have sex with a mouse. Later on, another sequence of interpretations revolves around women's dreams of giving birth to various animals, again based on sympathetic principles: 'If she (dreams of) giving birth to a cat, she will have many children. If she (dreams of) giving birth to a dog, she will have a male child. If she (dreams of) giving birth to an ass, she will have a foolish child,'⁴⁹ and so on.

To appreciate the real import of such dream texts, one needs to know for whom they are produced and how they were consulted. Did women go along to the dream interpreters themselves, or did their husbands do it for them? If the latter was the case, and the decoded dream was reported to the woman by a third party, the construction placed on the interpreter's handbook might be very different: it could be perceived as another means of controlling women's sexuality. Whatever the mechanics of consultation, one might argue that the Demotic dream interpretations do seem to reflect the Foucauldian model of ancient sexuality; their decodings are certainly not predicated on a sex-based model of the dreamers personality, and the dreams of women about sex and childbirth reflect their primary social roles as wives and potential mothers. In Græco-Roman Egypt, dreams about sex had more to do with semiotics than sexuality in any sense that is currently understood.

Whether or not one can talk about sexuality *per se* in Græco-Roman Egypt, one certainly can talk about the various aspects of the culture which utilised sex and sexual meetings. This has determined the thematic arrangement of this book as a series of *sondages*, the archaeologists' practice trenches, which reveal the successive layers of a site's occupation and usage. As a preliminary excavation, I shall start digging into the most fundamental ground for the expression of sexuality in its broadest sense – the human body.

1 Darwin (1789) Canto II 105–62 (excerpted).

2 Harrison (1990) 10.

3 *The Times*, 11 November 1898: Sir Edward Maunde Thompson quoted in the report of the Annual General Meeting of the Egypt Exploration Fund, sponsor of Grenfell and Hunt's digs.

4 Milligan (1910) xxvi–xxvii.

5 Lewis (1985) 8.

6 On the appropriation of Sappho, papyrology and eroticism, see Jenkyns (1984) 82.

- 7 For discussion of the reading of this text, see Youtie (1974) 33.
- 8 This letter is discussed further in [Chapter 5](#) below.
- 9 Quoted in Cumont (1937) 184 n. 2. 'The private letters found among the papyri give the impression of a society if not austere at least normal.'
- 10 See e.g. Whitehorne (1979) 243.
- 11 Veyne (1987); Veyne (1978).
- 12 Veyne (1987) 36.
- 13 Foucault (1988) 42.
- 14 Milligan (1910) xxvi-xxvii.
- 15 E.g. Manniche (1987) and Whitehorne (1979) *passim*.
- 16 Marriage and divorce documents are discussed fully in [Chapter 4](#) below.
- 17 On this problem and its ramifications for the historian, see Bagnall (1993) 6–7.
- 18 Graffito in a back room of the suburban baths, Herculaneum: see Grant (1971) 210.
- 19 On this problem generally, see Tait in Johnson (1992) 303–10.
- 20 Halperin *et al.* (1990) 6.
- 21 The evidential problems of studying private life in Pharaonic Egypt are clearly stated by Robins (1993) 11–20.
- 22 Shaw (1992).
- 23 Pomeroy (1984) 111. Dryton and his family are also discussed in Lewis (1986) 88–103.
- 24 Strabo XVII 2.5.
- 25 Pomeroy (1984) 111.
- 26 Edwards (1877) ix.
- 27 In fact, this book is primarily about Egypt in the Roman period, but this is dictated more by the survival of evidence than any other factor, and earlier and later material has been brought in where appropriate. The usefulness of the term Græco-Roman Egypt is discussed by Lewis (1971) 3–14.
- 28 Text from Barguet (1953) 65, excerpted = Lichtheim (1980) 97–99.
- 29 See, for instance, Richlin (1993), Thorp (1992) and most recently Goldhill (1995).
- 30 King in Porter and Teich (1994) 29–31.
- 31 Halperin *et al.* (1990) 5.
- 32 Freud (1900) 768–9.
- 33 Price in Halperin *et al.* (1990) 380.
- 34 Artemidorus 1 79.
- 35 Herodotus VI 107.
- 36 P British Museum 10683 I 21, translated from the text in Gardiner (1935).
- 37 Full publication by Volten (1942).
- 38 The Greek texts appear in UPZ 77–81, and are discussed by Thompson (1988) 224–5. Demotic texts: P. Bologna Dem. 3171 and 3173, re-edited by Bresciani (1978) and O. Leningrad 1129.
- 39 Ray in Vleeming (1987) 85 and 89. UPZ I 80, a list of Ptolemaius' dreams, mentions 'the (dreams) about Thauēs for Harpaēsis,' which may suggest that this was a list taken to a dream interpreter.
- 40 Stela in the Cairo Museum, inventory no. CG 17567 (Greek sculpture).
- 41 On this distinction see Artemidorus' introduction to *Oneirocritica* IV: 'A dream that has no meaning and predicts nothing, one that is active only while one sleeps and has arisen from an irrational desire, an extraordinary fear, or from a surfeit or lack of food is called an *enhypnion*.'
- 42 P. Bologna Dem. 3171, incorporating some additions to the re-edition by Bresciani (1978).
- 43 P. Bologna Dem. 3173, incorporating some additions to the re-edition by

Bresciani (1978).

44 UPZ I 78, adopting the interpretation of Thompson (1988) 224 n. 72.

45 Thompson (1988) 225.

46 Freud (1900) 528 n. 1.

47 P. Carlsberg XIIb 2.14–38, translated from the text in Volten (1942) 84–6.

48 Price in Halperin *et al.* (1990) 376 n. 26.

49 P. Carlsberg XIIIb from the text in Volten (1942) 99. Another example of a sexual dream involving an ass from the Demotic sources may be found in Ray (1976) 57.9.

[2]

The Social Body

Embodying the Past

In Berlin in 1888 a tremendous stir was caused by the first exhibition of the Viennese antique dealer Theodor Graf's collection of newly-excavated Roman mummy portraits from the Fayyum. 'The best of the Graf portraits are of such a convincing truthfulness to life, so full of individuality,' gushed the great classical scholar Ulrich Wilcken in his review of the exhibition of the Graf collection.¹ Other scholars went even further in their attempts to bring the individuals depicted in the portraits back to life. 'The portraiture of these paintings will be put in a clearer light when we compare them with the actual heads of the persons,' wrote Flinders Petrie gruesomely in his publication of the 1911 season at Hawara, which yielded 65 portraits. He proposed that the skulls of the portrait sitters should be refleshed with wax according to a process perfected by Professor Macalister, then curator of the Archaeology and Anthropology Museum at Cambridge, and added: 'when the heads have been ... restored to their natural fullness by Prof. Macalister's process, it will be possible to compare the portrait with the actual person.'² Still others imagined themselves in a sort of physical communion with the subjects of the mummy portraits: I have always thought it rather significant that Sigmund Freud purchased one to hang in his consulting room. And the art historian Mary Swindler was much engaged by the splendid portrait of Hermione from Hawara (see Plate 2), whose inscription further identifies her as *grammatikê*, 'educated'. Swindler, writing in 1929, promoted her to a 'reader in classics', and added 'the face of Hermione is a joyless one. We do not know whether to sympathise with the young who came under her eye or regret, rather, that the profession was so uninspiring. In any case, the Hermione type seems to be self-perpetuating in the academic world.'³

The combination of visual and documentary evidence from Græco-Roman Egypt enabled modern viewers to come face to face with the past in a unique way. The first scholars to work on this material were right to assert the living, corporeal individuality of the people they were studying: but the very fact that they went to such pains to

‘embody’ them, to literally re-clothe them in flesh as Petrie wished, is significant. In their unconscious use of the bodies of the dead inhabitants of Græco-Roman Egypt as a metaphor for a living society, Wilcken, Petrie and the others were, in a sense, precursors of the anthropologists who have espoused the view that the most fundamental structures of the larger group are anchored in the most basic experiences of the body. By its very nature, the human body is both physically given at the same time as being culturally constituted. The anthropologist Marcel Mauss formulated the view, subsequently developed by writers such as Mary Douglas, that the basic aspects of bodily activities are all social constructions, and that the human body is to be seen in terms of symbolic systems. Thus the individual body is a metaphor for society, and bodily order and disorder can be read as metaphors for social organisation and social relations. Douglas sees a correspondence between bodily expressions of control and social ones and that this control, as a response to disorder, is made through systematic classification. The body is the principal medium of classification in the process of creating taxonomies to explain disorder and restore order. But within such a system, not all individuals have the same kind of body: the body of a Roman emperor is ‘the conjunction of a private, human body and a political, divine body’⁴ to objectify the nature of power exercised by a mortal, while the slave’s body expresses his powerlessness. Thus the ways that people inhabited and experienced their bodies in the ancient world were inseparable from their social and economic position.

The Greeks who settled in Egypt from the early Ptolemaic period onwards came into contact with a society which had a very complex and systematised attitude towards the human body that was, in most ways, rather different to Greek ideas. Both Greeks and Egyptians, at least those of élite status, had a clear notion of what constituted a bodily ideal and had traditionally placed considerable importance on the cultivation of the physical body: both were heirs to artistic traditions which idealised and eroticised the human body, which created and enforced discrimination and classification of the world, and focussed attention on bodily boundaries as metaphors for marginal states. The Egyptian emphasis on the purity and care of the body was in part a reflection of their concepts about the physical body being a permanent repository for the separate incorporeal elements which constituted an individual’s potential immortality. It was necessary to take good care of the body, for it would be the home of one’s spirit for eternity. Greek physical culture, however, was a social institution of the city-state, integrating the aesthetic ideal of the male body, perfectly formed by training in the gymnasium, with the political ideal of the quintessential responsible male citizen. Thus the

oiling, shaving and exercising of the Greek male citizen's body was a public display of political status. The Greek writers on Egypt were perplexed by the Egyptian attitude to the body, and ascribe the proverbial hot temper and lawlessness of the Egyptians to their lack of physical self-discipline. The Egyptians are 'quick tempered and ignorant of city life (*apolitikon*)', says Strabo.⁵ *Apolitikon* is a loaded term, implying that the Egyptians do not conform to what the Greeks saw as the crucial concomitants of citizen life, of which athletics and body culture were an integral part. Diodorus Siculus is also puzzled by what he sees as the passive Egyptian way of looking after the body: the Egyptians regard the building up of the body by daily exercises in wrestling and gymnastics in the Greek manner as imparting an excessive and potentially dangerous energy to it. Accordingly, they regulate the body by enervation, with enemas, fasting and emetics. In their quest for physical and spiritual purity, they also circumcise themselves, a practice repellent to the Greeks.⁶ Therefore in spite of their elaborate physical regimen, the bodies of Egyptians can only be other to those of Greeks, because their forms of body culture manifest themselves differently and have different social results.

In Græco-Roman Egypt, then, the body could be seen as one of the clearest indices of cultural affiliation. How, and at what levels, did these culturally specific views of something as fundamental as the body interact? This chapter will consider three aspects of the body in Græco-Roman Egypt: the ways in which the human body was acculturated, transformed from its natural to its social state; concepts of the perfect body; and how people defined their bodies, both with reference to their own and to those of others.

From Nature to Culture

In Græco-Roman Egypt, as in many cultures which practise infanticide, the mere fact of having being born into that society was not an immediate assurance of social membership of it. An individual needed to be transferred from the unsocialised 'natural' state to culture by ceremonies of social inclusion. These typically include rituals surrounding the physiological changes that are part of the human reproductive cycle: puberty, pregnancy, childbirth and menstruation. At birth and puberty in particular, these rites can involve 'cultural work upon the body, and their effect is to transform the natural body into a social entity with rights and status.'⁷ 'Cultural work upon the body' can be something as ephemeral as clipping off a lock of hair, or something as irreversible as surgical alteration of the body. Participation in ceremonies involving these changes symbolised consent to the social order on the level of the individual body. In

Egypt, these rituals would have differed according to the social status and, one might surmise, the ethnic group of the participants, though it must be stressed that evidence for rites of passage is problematic. By their very nature, they are events which do not tend to generate written documentation, and as always, most of the textual evidence to survive concerns the urban élite. There are whole sectors of society for which there is no information at all: the circumcision of members of the priestly caste, for instance, must have been attended by some ritual, but the form it might have taken can only be guessed at.

The rituals which characteristically surround birth are particularly difficult to locate, since they took place in a female sphere where information about them would have only been transmitted orally. During pregnancy and the dangerous process of birth the mother could be magically protected by such safeguards as an apotropaic bloodstone amulet depicting a uterus shaped like an inverted jug locked with a key, which was believed to regulate the proper opening and closing of the womb (Figure 2). The dwarfish god Bes (Figure 3), the traditional protector of Egyptian women in childbirth, continued in this role during the Græco-Roman period. A third century CE stela from Memphis calls Bes ‘the great god of women’s wombs’ and goes on to address him as ‘protector, guardian, healer, sower, nourisher and awakener’. Each epithet indicates his importance as a tutelary deity throughout every stage of pregnancy and foetal growth as far as birth.⁸ Women gave birth squatting or kneeling on supports, such as bricks. The important moments of the cutting of the umbilicus, which marks the creation of a separate human being, the first bathing of the child, and its handing over to the father were probably ritualised, but the Egyptian sources are silent. Some crude drawings from a tomb chapel in Hermopolis (Figure 4) seem to depict births. The artist here paid considerable attention to the umbilicus, perhaps hinting that it had some significance in birth ritual and the autonomy of the child.⁹ Fragments of a Demotic gynaecological treatise¹⁰ from Crocodilopolis in the Fayyum include prescriptions for the expulsion of the placenta, when the woman is in a state of *’hrw wdā.* The Demotic term seems to mean ‘the day of being apart’ or ‘the day of separation,’ perhaps referring to some post-natal seclusion of the mother while she cleanses herself from birth-pollution (see further below). There is no evidence for the afterbirth being kept, though dried placenta appears as an ingredient in magical spells, suggesting that it may have been preserved. Pre-Hellenistic Egyptian ideas about the afterbirth as a kind of twin of the new-born child could have led to it being preserved in some form, as was the case in rural Egypt in the 1920s. During the course of her fieldwork around Asyut in Middle Egypt, the anthropologist Winifred Blackman observed that ‘the afterbirth is

dealt with in a variety of ways ... it is often called *el-walad et-tani* (the other, or second, child) and some people regard it as an unfinished infant. If a woman is anxious to make sure of having another child she buries the placenta of the latest-born under the threshold of her house.¹¹ Similarly, if a woman had lost several children but wanted to get pregnant again, she would put the placenta of the dead child in a bowl and bury it under the floor with various food offerings.¹² It is possible that the large empty bowls found in association with food offerings and infant burials under the floors of Middle Kingdom houses at Kahun¹³ may be connected with some similar belief about the afterbirth and subsequent pregnancy. Otherwise, successful parturitions may have been marked by the pious donation of a garment or other object to a temple: this perhaps explains the entries in Egyptian temple inventories which record the donation of items by women designated as ‘the mother of so-and-so’.

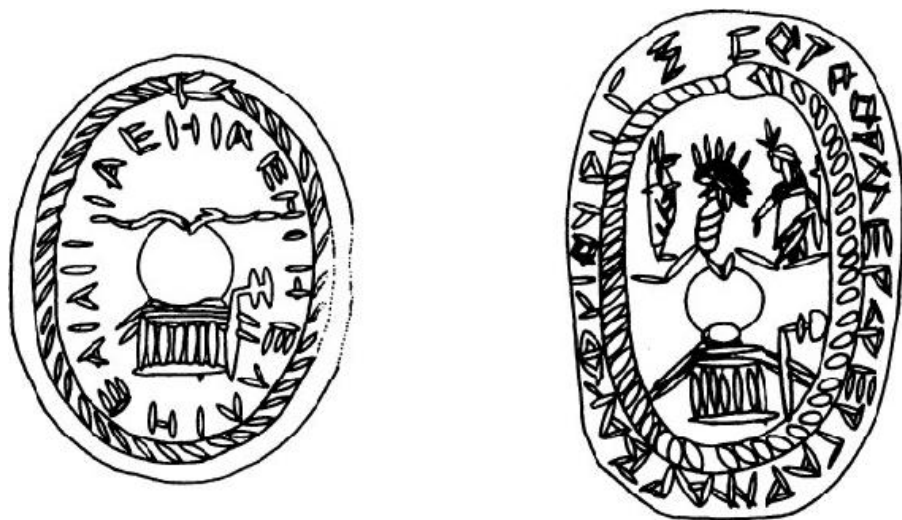


Figure 2 Egyptian uterine amulets in haematite, showing the womb as in inverted jar locked by a key. (c. 3rd century CE: Cologne; after Daniel and Maltomini 1991)



Figure 3 Forms of the god Bes, patron of the reproductive lives of women. (After Lindsay 1965 and Manniche 1987)



Figure 4 Birth scene from Hermopolis emphasising the umbilicus. (1st century BCE: after Gabra, 1941, pl. XLVIII)

In spite of the assertions of Strabo, Herodotus and other ancient authorities, infanticide was practised in Græco-Roman Egypt, and the cutting of the umbilical cord would probably have been the moment when neonates with obvious physical defects were killed.¹⁴ The father may have determined whether or not the child was to be exposed or allowed to live.¹⁵ Apart from this, male involvement in the birth would probably have been minimal. As far as can be told, the whole birth process seems to have been viewed rather casually. In the third century CE, a man called Sarapasto sent a letter (P. Oxy. IX 1216) to his wife, whom he had left pregnant at Oxyrhynchus:

I pray always to the gods for you and you know from experience my devotion, even if I don't write to you, but you have never thought it worthwhile to send your good wishes in a letter. A year today I've been absent from you and all that time you haven't thought it worthwhile to let me know about yourself and your brother Horion and how he is doing. I love him dearly. Have you produced a male child?

The hierarchy of familial relationships seems clear in Sarapasto's letter, with the brother-in-law being more important than the never-seen infant, but his apparent insouciance may come out of a desire for emotional protection against the possible loss of the child. The extent to which high infant mortality would have affected attitudes to the death of young children is very difficult to gauge. Writing of seventeenth-century England, Laurence Stone suggested that, 'to preserve their mental stability, parents were obliged to limit the degree of their psychological involvement with their infant children',¹⁶ and his ideas have been applied to child death in the ancient world; but by the same token, the deaths of the young in the ancient world were sometimes sincerely mourned. Egyptian funerary inscriptions from sites such as Kom Abu Billo in the Delta often commemorate dead children and infants, implying that they had sufficient social personality to merit commemoration, and the stock epithet most usually applied to them is *ahôros*, 'dead before their time'.¹⁷

There are several texts from Egypt, however, which point to considerable importance being placed on the child's survival of its first year of life. It has been suggested that almost a third of all live-born Roman infants would have died within their first year of life,¹⁸ so surviving the first year might have been noted as crucial: if that milestone were passed, the child was perhaps more likely to reach maturity. Although it may be arguing *ex silentio*, there are no funerary inscriptions from Egypt in memory of children less than a year old, suggesting that if they died before then, an individual commemoration

was unjustified. At all events, the first birthdays of some élite children were certainly ritualised. In a papyrus invitation (P. Oxy. XXXVI 2791) of the second century CE from Oxyrhynchus, Diogenes bids a guest come to a feast being held in the Serapeum to celebrate the first birthday of his daughter. The festivities were probably held in a hired temple room, indicative of the importance accorded the event. A festival which may have had a similar significance is referred to in a letter (P. Fay. 113) written by the army veteran Lucius BeUienus Gemellus, who lived in the nome capital of the Fayyum during the reign of Trajan, to his son Sabinus in the village of Euhemeria. In the midst of other day-to-day orders about the management of an olive yard, Gemellus tells Sabinus, 'on the 18th or 19th of Choiak, send to the city twelve drachmas worth of fish for the little boy's fortieth-day (*tetrakosta*) festival.' The festival is otherwise unattested, but is probably connected with the idea, common in many societies, that the period of forty days is ritually important in connection with pregnancy and birth, partly because lochial discharge usually ends by the fortieth day after parturition.¹⁹ Perhaps the child was perceived as liminal during his first forty-day period, and it was believed that the child's life has not really 'begun' in social terms until after the liminal forty-day period has passed. This belief is still held in some contemporary societies, such as in rural Crete and Mexico, and Blackman says that it was also current in Middle Egypt in the 1920s.²⁰ Possible confirmation for the forty-day post-natal purification comes in an early Roman inscription²¹ from Ptolemais in the Thebaid, regulating the periods of time that had to elapse after being in certain ritually unclean states before the person was pure and could enter a sanctuary: seven days after menstruation or illness, fourteen days after exposing a child, and so on. The period that had to elapse after childbirth was forty days, perhaps reminiscent of the ironic Greek view that the woman is most ritually dangerous when at her most fruitful. Post-parturition seclusions in Dynastic Egypt seem to have been of shorter duration, however: the one Egyptian reference mentions 'a cleansing' (*sw'b*) of fourteen days after the birth,²² and the forty-day period may well be a Greek custom.

It is not known whether the festivities held to mark a child's first year of life were accompanied by anything more than a good dinner, or whether there was also some other ritual event. It is also unknown whether at this stage there was any 'cultural work' done upon the child's body to modify it, such as the binding of limbs, cranial manipulation, or massaging. In a second or third century CE letter (P. Mich. VIII 508) a woman called Thaisarion writes to her sister Sarapous, 'please send me two jars of radish oil... for I have need of them when I give birth', but unfortunately she does not say why she

wanted the oil: for massaging her own body or the child's? The use of oil massages for pregnant women is known from the New Kingdom.²³ Alternatively, the obstetric writers such as Soranus of Ephesus (who was certainly consulted, if perhaps not followed, in Egypt) propose elaborate bandaging and massaging of the infant, not only to impart an aesthetically pleasing physique but also, as Aline Rousselle has suggested, to accustom the child to control and render it docile.²⁴ The nursing of the infant seems to have been quite protracted by modern European standards. Contracts with wet-nurses²⁵ in Greek and Demotic usually specify a two- or three-year suckling period. The latter length of time is attested in some Pharaonic sources,²⁶ but two years was probably the normal practice. These nursing documents do give some interesting vignettes into child-rearing and ideas about lactation, but in some ways they cannot be read as reflecting norms. Most of the women who undertake to nurse the infants of others for wages are either slaves whose labour is being hired out by their owners, or free women suckling exposed neonates for a third party who intended to rear the child as a slave. The child usually goes to live with the nurse, though the nurse might live with the family if she is suckling a non-slave child. Most interestingly, the contracts impose sexual restrictions indiscriminately on free and slave nurses. In one contract (BGU IV 1107) while the wet-nurse was being paid and feeding the child 'with her own milk pure and untainted,' she was also 'to take proper care of both herself and the child, not injuring her milk nor sleeping with a man or becoming pregnant nor suckling another child.' Soranus recommends celibacy for nurses, since sex supposedly has a deleterious effect on their milk 'by stimulating menstrual catharsis through the uterus'.²⁷ One can only speculate as to how far these sexual restrictions were intended to be practically enforceable, especially since the nurses are living away from those who might have the greatest interest in enforcing them. Is one to suppose that poverty made these wet-nurses (not to mention the men who had put them in the appropriate state for the job) undertake to give up sex for up to three years? They could have engaged in non-reproductive sex or coitus interruptus, of course. Or are these regulations to be seen as an expression of a system-wide desire to discipline and control not only womens sexuality (especially the sexuality of economically dependent women and slaves), but also the child itself, who was literally drinking in the concept of control with the nurse's milk?

Physical discipline to inculcate self-control was certainly important for the child in Græco-Roman Egypt. The neo-Pythagorean writers of the Hellenistic period counsel physical restraint for women, and examples of their works have been found in Egypt transposed into familiar *koinê* Greek from the difficult Doric dialect in which they

were originally composed. (An example is translated on pages 71–2.) These writings may have been used as educational material to inculcate proper principles in the young, though it is not known whether they were aimed at girls or boys. An example of one of these texts on papyrus is quoted in the next chapter. Young male children were seen as being particularly vulnerable to the baleful influence of unconstrained women's behaviour. In the third century CE, a man called Eusebius wrote a letter (P. Oxy. LV 3 815) to his friend Apollonius:

I take heart because you are looking after my lord son Sabinus. Being a child, it is necessary for him not to be led into undisciplined ways (*ataxia*), and regarding this I believe that Epagathus will receive orders from you to stay by him. And if those women, Adora and her crew, persist in their same wantonness, let them be restrained by your severity, my lord, and by that of my lady daughter Ptolemaïs.

Similar ideas appear in an early Roman epitaph to a five-year-old called Epichares. While expressing genuine grief at the death of the child, he is still talked about in terms of control and dominance:

The son of Iason, a child who was obedient to his parents, and who during his five years of life only did the things that were appropriate, has nonetheless not escaped the unfortunate thread woven by the Fates, and was thrown to a bitter destiny. Oh chthonian gods who inhabit the realm of forgetfulness, receive Epichares kindly.²⁸

Rites of Passage

If the child survived unscathed as far as puberty, he or she then faced the next period of life crisis. In Egypt, puberty seems to have been defined in terms of sexual maturation around the standard age of thirteen or fourteen, though this is not the case with all societies; puberty is essentially a social or cultural construct of what it is to be 'adult', and therefore puberty rituals can take place long before or after the bodily signs of adulthood are manifested, as early as six or as late as twenty years old. The male rite at puberty *par excellence* is circumcision, and the ancient sources from Herodotus onwards make Egypt its *fons et origo*: 'The Colchians, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practised circumcision ... I have no doubt that the other nations adopted it as a result of their contact with Egypt,' says Herodotus (II 104). There is

some confirmation for this from Pharaonic Egypt, where collective initiations for whole age-groups of boys centring around circumcision are known,²⁹ but it is not certain whether this rite was mandatory for all boys in the age category. In some Pharaonic funerary stelae, the act of sponsoring circumcisions is linked with benevolent acts carried out for the benefactor's home town. The custom probably did not persist into the Hellenistic period, perhaps in response to the Greek revulsion for circumcision. Herodotus finds the practice aesthetically unpleasing: 'other peoples leave their genitals as they were at birth, except for those who have learned from Egypt, but the Egyptians circumcise themselves ... for the sake of cleanliness, preferring to be clean than of seemly appearance.'³⁰ Some men who had been circumcised went to considerable lengths to rectify an exposed glans, usually by artificially stretching the remaining skin around the penis in an operation known as *epispasma*.³¹ By the Roman period, circumcision was only mandatory for members of the priestly caste, and was apparently not always performed at the age of biological puberty. In 189 CE, a priestess of Tebtynis sent an application (P. Tebt. II 292) to the high priest of Alexandria to allow her son Pakebkis, aged 7, and her first-cousin Panesis, aged 11, to be circumcised so that 'the boys may be able to ... perform the sacred offices assigned them.' Getting permission for the operation was a lengthy bureaucratic procedure, involving several exchanges of letters and documentation, and finally a personal examination of the boys by the high priest in Alexandria, who would only authorise the circumcision after verifying that the boy was free of physical blemishes that rendered him ritually impure.³² This complexity is as much a reflection of Roman policy towards the native priesthood as of the social importance of the operation, although the attention it centred on the boy would surely have had some psychological effect. The boy's new status as a member of the priestly caste able to fulfil his ritual duties must undoubtedly have been marked by some festivity, but there are no references in the Demotic texts which would be the most likely sources of information.

For the teenage sons of the Hellenised urban élite in provincial Egypt, rites of passage revolved not around circumcision but a public status declaration, in effect an affirmation of their membership of the paternal kin-group. By listing his paternal forebears fully, this public status declaration or 'scrutiny' (*epikrisis* or *eiskrisis*) confirmed the boy's lineage and his inclusion in one of several élite civic categories eligible for fiscal and other privileges: the 'metropolitan twelve drachma class', 'the gymnasium members', and the ephebate. Belonging to the ephebate, originating in Athenian military training, was an important cultural requirement for those considering

themselves Greek in Egypt, and stressed the differences between Greek and indigenous attitudes to the body. In his study of education in antiquity, Henri Marrou argued that induction into the ephebate ‘provided an initiation into the Greek way of life, above all to athletics, its most characteristic feature. And, as one of the elements of hellenism in these “colonial” countries, the *ephebeia* also encouraged the growth of an aristocracy. This can be clearly seen in Roman Egypt where ... its function was to initiate young Greeks into a life of sport, which was the only thing that would make them truly civilised and set them apart from the natives.’³³

Written declarations of *epikrisis* or *eiskrisis* were usually made in the year when the declarant reached the age of thirteen or fourteen, thus becoming liable to pay the capitation tax. In the fullest form of these documents, the declarants state that the boy ‘has entered into the class of thirteen- (or fourteen)-year-olds’ in a given year, list his ancestors, and swear on oath that the foregoing genealogy is true and that the boy is of the stated lineage, ‘not being adopted or spurious, and that use has not been made of other people’s papers or coincidences of name.’³⁴ Apart from being the age of fiscal responsibility, fourteen was also the canonical age of male puberty in antiquity.³⁵ The declaration just quoted, written on 28 August 260 CE, lists the boy’s forebears back as far as seven generations, to 4/5 CE, and the reading aloud of these names would have served to underscore the boy’s own name (characteristically that of an ancestor) and thus his standing within and affiliation to the paternal kin-group, ‘since having a name is an institutional mark of social membership.’³⁶ I have argued elsewhere³⁷ that these status declarations signify more than a mere bureaucratic formality to gain tax relief, and that they were one component of an entire *rite de passage* system whose other elements could include ‘cultural work upon the body’ in the form of shearing off hair to mark the transition from child to adult, followed by expensive celebrations recognising this change in status, including garlanding the boy and holding a feast at which he was the guest of honour. The *epikrisis* banquets could take place in important public buildings such as the Capitulum, the traditional scene of Roman *rites de passage*, as well as in private homes.

In rituals of induction which place such emphasis on bodily integrity, what was the position of physical minorities? A Greek inscription from Memphis³⁸ dealing with the ephebate makes clear the link between the notion of the perfect youthful body and entry into élite groups at puberty. This inscription, dating to 220 CE, enumerates 47 ephebes from Memphis who fall into two classes, ‘boys’ (*paides*) and ‘beardless youths’ (*ageneioi*) who have been victors or unsuccessful participants in various public games and contests in

honour of the defied Antinous. This long list is followed by a third category of boys who are said to be 'in the category of those who are ill-proportioned' or 'overgrown (*hypermegethos*) and others who are *katadeôn tèn opsin!* The latter phrase is difficult to translate. It could mean 'with defective eyesight' or 'falling short in respect of their appearance', i.e. physically unattractive. These boys, of whom nineteen are listed, seem to have been inducted into the ephebic corps officially without actually taking part in the contests, either because of physical inability or because they were not aesthetically pleasing enough to take part in a public games.

There are other public rituals associated with males and civic status. At an obscure festival called the *mallokouria* or *mellokouria*,³⁹ hair-cutting seems to be the main ritual that took place. This feast is known from three papyri found at Oxyrhynchus, though one of them deals with events taking place at Alexandria. Once again, a papyrus invitation (P. Oxy. XII 1484) is the principal source: 'Apollonius invites you to dine at the table of the lord Sarapis on the occasion of the *mellokouria* of his [...] in the temple of Thoeiris [...].' There are two problems with this text. First, the papyrus is damaged at a critical point, so the status and gender of the persons honoured by the *mellokouria* is not known. Other occurrences of the word suggest clear links with male coming-of-age ceremonies, so it is a tempting surmise, but no more, to supply [sons] in the gap. Second, there is the reading of the word itself — is it *mallokouria* or *mellokouria*? The difference is significant. *Mellokouria* would mean 'the occasion when one is about to become a *kouros* or youth, whereas *mallokouria* would mean 'the occasion of cutting the hair-lock.' The shearing of hair is one of the commonest symbols of transition, and is well attested in both Greece and Egypt for all kinds of events at liminal periods. A papyrus of the late third century CE (P. Oxy. XXIV 2407) uses the generic term *mallokouretas* to describe 'those (boys) who have already been admitted into the tribe', i.e. the paternal kin-group, and another document (P. Oxy. XLIX 3463) probably refers to a comparable event. In this application for his son to join the élite ephebic group, the first step towards full Alexandrian citizenship, Heracleides informs various Alexandrian officials who regulated ephebate admissions that 'my son Theon ... had his long hair (*mallon*) cut off (*ekare*) in honour of the city on the fifteenth of Tybi in the Great Serapeum, in the presence of the priest and the hypomnematographus and the exegetes.' Once again the ritualisation of the event is clear: the ceremony takes place in the most important building in Alexandria, the Serapeum, and is attended by important city officials, who are listed in ascending order of rank. The mention of hair offerings in connection with joining the ephebate recalls the Koureotis, the third day of the Apatouria festival at Athens,

when offerings of the shorn hair of young men about to join the ephebate were made to Artemis.⁴⁰ Greek city states provided some of the cultural exemplars for Alexandria and the provincial cities of Roman Egypt, and this ritual hair-cutting could be a direct Greek importation and an assertion of Greek identity. Conversely, could this be an instance of cultural fusion? Egyptian children wore the ‘lock of youth’ up to puberty, and several mummy portraits of the Roman period indicate that the Græco-Egyptian bourgeoisie had adopted the wearing of the youth-lock (see [Figure 5](#)). Any customs which attended its shearing at adulthood could also have been adopted, especially if the long Greek tradition of making hair-offerings at puberty could be accommodated within indigenous practice.



Figure 5 Pre-adolescent boy wearing the lock of youth or ‘Horus-lock’. (Antonine period, c. 150 CE: Berlin, Vorderasitsches Museum, Inv. 31161,4)

The evidence is more equivocal for rites at puberty for girls,

particularly those that may have involved genital mutilation. As with male circumcision, there seems to have been a consensus in the classical sources from Strabo onwards that female circumcision was the norm in Egypt. 'Among the customs most assiduously observed among the (Egyptians) is the rearing of every child that is born, and the circumcision of the males and the excision (*ektemnein*) of the females,' says Strabo.⁴¹ I shall return to this passage later. St Ambrose, writing in the fifth century CE, clearly thinks that genital mutilation for Egyptian women is a concomitant of their menarche. 'The Egyptians circumcise their males in their fourteenth year, and the females among them are brought to be circumcised at the same time of life, because it is clear that from that age the passions of men begin to torment, and the monthly periods of women begin.' Galen refers to the excision of the nymphae as something typically Egyptian.⁴² Via the medical writers and their later redactors, this association of Egypt with clitoridectomy has become so firmly entrenched that even today one form of female genital modification is known as 'Pharaonic circumcision'. In a fictitious exchange of letters between the gynaecologist Soranus and Marcus Antonius, probably composed some time in the Renaissance and incorporated in seventeenth-century anthologies of Latin pornography, Soranus recommends a clitoridectomy to curb the excessive sexual appetite of Cleopatra. The idea's first (and somewhat garbled) appearance in English is in one of the earliest works of what might be called comparative ethnography, John Bulwer's *A View of the People of the Whole World* (1654), which has an entire chapter devoted to 'strange inventive contradictions against nature, practically maintained by divers nations in the ordering of their privy-parts.'⁴³ Bulwer said, 'the extravagant invention of man hath run out so far as the Castration of women; Andramyses ... was the first that made women Eunuches ... after whose example the women of Egypt were sometimes spaded. The end might be the same in spading women as men, both being made thereby impotent, and so consequently apt to envy others, and lesse subject to be corrupted with their passions.'⁴⁴ Bulwer seems to be confusing sterilisation with clitoridectomy.

Female genital mutilation can take several forms, from removing parts of the clitoris and/or labia minora to cutting off the labia majora, labia minora and clitoris in their entirety. The latter, most extreme form, known as infibulation, is still practised in southern Egypt and the Sudan.⁴⁵ The Egyptians are most often associated with clitoridectomy, and the most graphic ancient description of the operation in the so-called Egyptian fashion is given by the physician Aetius of Amida, writing in the sixth century CE. 'With certain of the (Egyptian) women,' he writes, 'their clitoris increases in growth and

becomes unseemly and shameful, but also by being continually rubbed by their garments it excites them and rouses the desire for copulation; and accordingly, on account of the increased size, the Egyptians determined to cut it off, especially at the time when girls are ready to be married. The operation is accomplished in this manner. They cause the girl to be seated on a stool, and a strong young man standing behind her places his forearms beneath her thighs and buttocks, holding fast her legs and her whole body. The operator standing in front of her seizes her clitoris with a wide-mouthed forceps, pulling it out with the left hand, whilst with his right hand he cuts it off with the teeth of the forceps.'⁴⁶

So much for the literary sources; and as always there is the problem of whether one can then take as statements of facts or as imperialist canards expressing the 'otherness' of Egyptian culture. Certainly Strabo's comments about universal child-rearing and male circumcision do not seem to represent the state of affairs in early Roman Egypt, where neither the rearing of all children nor circumcision for all males was practised: so is one to assume the same about his remarks on female circumcision? None the less, the repeated links between menarche and genital mutilation deserve further investigation, and there is some papyrological evidence for female circumcision, albeit very scattered. A papyrus from Saqqara (P. Lond. I 24), related to the archive of Ptolemaius and dated 163 BCE, contains a request from an Egyptian woman, Nephoris, for return of 1300 drachmas to go towards the dowry of her daughter Tathemis, because 'she is the right age to be circumcised, according to the Egyptian custom', as a preliminary to marriage. Despite this apparent confirmation of Ambrose, Strabo and Aetius that female circumcision is an Egyptian custom when a girl becomes nubile, one must still be wary about inferring too much from it. The statement about circumcision is not made by Nephoris herself, but by Harmais, who had allegedly been defrauded by her; and one wonders how much he would necessarily have known about local womens customs. Also, the girl Tathemis is associated with the temple of the Syrian goddess Astarte at Saqqara, so her circumcision may be an anomalous case of foreign influence. An earlier magical text seems to associate some form of female genital mutilation with the cult of Astarte.⁴⁷ There is also the difficulty that if clitoridectomy or female circumcision really were Egyptian practices of long standing, one would expect to find evidence for them from the Dynastic period. On New Kingdom female fecundity figurines, the genitalia are reduced to a slit with no external parts, resembling the most radical forms of infibulation, but this is probably only an artistic convention dictated by necessity. Perhaps the strongest argument against female circumcision as a regular Egyptian

practice is the absence of any implication of it in the gynaecological texts of the Dynastic and subsequent periods. These deal with such an extensive range of problems associated with women's reproductive organs that remedies for botched circumcisions, clitoridectomies or infibulations would surely have been included if such customs had been prevalent. The medical employment of vaginal contraceptive pessaries, and the insertion of fairly large objects such as onions and heads of garlic for cures and birth prognoses,⁴⁸ would be difficult if the women were badly scarred and vulvally contracted from genital operations. Contraceptive pessaries, whether in the form of some kind of solid tablet or a cervical plug made of fabric, were also probably fairly large devices filling the rear projection of the vagina and the area around the opening to the uterus. Added to the medical evidence is the fact that no female mummies exhibit signs of any kind of genital modification, though admittedly few bodies have enough soft tissue preserved in the pubic area to be absolutely certain. Later texts, including medical papyri from Roman Egypt, also seem to assume that the external genitalia of women and men will be in an unaltered state.

One might also consider the anthropological likelihood of female circumcision in Egyptian society. The anthropologists Karen and Jeffrey Paige have suggested that 'the dilemma created by a daughters menarche should be more serious in societies in which fraternal interest groups are weak or absent than in societies with strong fraternal interest groups.'⁴⁹ the latter are defined as 'males of a consanguineal kin-group' which can act as a cohesive unit to make, and enforce, bargains concerning women and children.⁵⁰ It seems to me that strong fraternal interest groups were operative in Egyptian society at all levels, but to test the validity of the Paige hypothesis much more would need to be known about patterns of residence after marriage, the sleeping arrangements of the mother and child, and the extent of post-partum taboos on sex between mother and father. These irrecoverable aspects of private life may have had an important effect on the nature and severity of the child's subsequent initiation ritual, particularly those involving a painful physical ordeal and bodily alteration.⁵¹ Cross-culturally, genital modifications for girls are rarer than for boys, and are usually some sort of parallel with boys' rites in the same society;⁵² it is unusual to find cultures which impose painful operations on girls, but not on boys. It is true that Ambrose and Strabo link male and female circumcision, but one cannot place too much credence on their accounts of the prevalence of male circumcision. I would suggest that the repeated linking of male and female circumcision by the ancient writers is to be seen as an articulation of the ancient anatomical concept that female genitals are inversions of the male genitals,⁵³ with the ovaries as testicles and the vagina a penis

turned outside in. The unmarked, unspecified and unqualified human body is male: females are only relative to males, literally ‘the opposite sex.’

This notion of a two-gender, one-sex genital parallelism is expressed in a Greek papyrus from Egypt (P. land. V 82) probably dating from the first century CE.⁵⁴ In fact, the papyrus may not be a medical text as such, but a fragment of an *onomasticon* or list of synonyms for various things, including different anatomical parts. Some of the terms for genitals have parallels with the words used for the genitalia in the magical papyri. The passage reads:

The pendulous part in the male is called the stem or pricket, the end of which is the glans (*balanos*, literally acorn). As for the skin around the glans, it is called the midskin, but the tip and the part that stretches around the glans is the foreskin. The lower part of the privities is called the scrotum, which contain the testicles; some people call them the twins (*didymoi*, literally ‘twins’, also the word for ovaries). The upper part of the genitalia is called the head and the lower part the rootstock. And as for the privities of women, the upper three-cornered (or hairy) part is called the *episeion*. The cleft is called the crack; the fleshy bit of this which lies near the labia is called the clitoris. Some call the fleshy parts on either side the myrtle-berry lips or cunt-lips, or the cliff-edges; and the lips of the female privities the hearth or nymphae, that is the rosebuds or brides ...

Several features of this text are relevant to the discussion of circumcision. The first is the equivalence of the male and female reproductive organs, which are considered alongside each other, sometimes using the same words for male and female organs. The second is that no modification of the genitalia is implied: males are expected to have the foreskin and females the clitoris and labia. It is also worth noting the vocabulary for the different genital parts, and how the external world is stamped upon the body. The genitalia are related to plants, geographical features, even parts of houses. Ancient medical terminology is rich, vernacular and punning, weaving the human body in with a whole range of other associations and incorporating it into a fertile macrocosm.

Given such evidence as there is, it seems improbable that female genital mutilation in association with life-crisis rites was widespread in Græco-Roman Egypt. This does not mean, however, that the puberty of young women was perceived as too unimportant to be socially marked. The historian Strabo mentions a festival being held for a girl ‘when the natural cleansing of the body (*physikê genetai*

katharsis tou sômatos) takes place',⁵⁵ which would seem to refer to some kind of post-menarche festival; but Strabo's rite is only held in honour of one girl at a time and is in a temple context. A festival for girls called the *therapeutêria* is now known from two, or possibly three,⁵⁶ dinner invitations of the Roman period from Oxyrhynchus. The texts are brief and formulaic: the hosts are the fathers, who invite unnamed individuals to dine in private houses on the occasion of the *therapeutêria* of their daughters. As is so often the case, there is a problem of terminology. Apart from in these invitations, the word *therapeutêria* had only occurred once before, again on an Oxyrhynchus papyrus (P. Oxy. Hels. 50.16) and in a context which suggested feasting: 'as for the wine supplies, we have had to postpone the *therapeutêria*.' The word suggests a derivation from the verb *therapeuein*, which has a wide range of meanings in late Greek from 'to do service, attend upon' (sometimes in a ritual context) to merely 'to cure': the adjective *therapeuterios*, 'convalesced', is also known. A corrupt passage in the glossary compiled by the Alexandrian scholar Hesychius has the puzzling entry '*therteria*: a festival'. Attempts have been made to reconcile this unknown and certainly corrupt word with various Greek festivals such as *anthisteria* or even *thesmophoria*, but a simpler emendation might be to assume that a few letters have dropped out of the middle of the word and restore *ther*<*apeu*>*teria*. Whatever the word's etymology, the evidence from the texts where it occurs implies two things: that the *therapeutêria* was not an impromptu celebration in response to recovery from an illness, for instance, but a term for a specific festivity; and that the girls feted at it are unmarried, since their fathers are the hosts at the feasts. In the social milieu of the third-century Oxyrhynchite bourgeoisie, the number of reasons that a father might have for honouring an unmarried daughter with a banquet would be limited. It is difficult to think of any reason unconnected with some kind of rite of passage.

I do not believe that the *therapeutêria* was a thanksgiving feast for the recovery of the girl from a genital operation, although there are some ethnographic parallels for using the vocabulary of healing as a category term to describe women after their genital operations: the operation has transferred them from a flawed to a cured state.⁵⁷ I find it more compelling to see in *therapeutêria* a derivation from the 'attend, render service' meaning of the verb and to link this with some kind of ritual observance on the part of the girl at some important stage in her unmarried life, quite possibly at menarche. In Egypt, where women tended to marry very young, a festival publicly to acknowledge a girl's nubility is feasible. The general trend in Egypt from the Ptolemaic period onwards seems to be for religious life to take greater account of the state temples, with a movement away from

observances at household altars or family and community shrines. As far back as the New Kingdom, the fertility figurines and phalli found as votive offerings in some state temples, such as that of Hathor at Deir el-Bahri, suggest that shrines could play a part in life-crisis rites.⁵⁸ This trend continued into the Roman period with feasts marking life-crisis rites taking place in temple buildings.⁵⁹ Some Ptolemaic marriage contracts in Demotic specify the handing over part of the dowry 'in the presence of Hathor'; and maybe the *therapeutêria* involved the donation of some offering to a temple as both a public pious act and an affirmation of new status.

Menstruation having begun, the woman would now be faced with its monthly recurrence, at least when she was not pregnant or lactating. The classical writers are silent about this area of reproductive ritual, possibly showing the typical male fear of woman's monthly bleeding. The sanctuary law from Ptolemaïs, quoted on p. 34 above, stipulates that seven days have to elapse after both menstruation and the end of sickness before a person can enter a temple, thus equating menstruation with disease. Yet menstruation has an anomalous position for men in societies which place a high value on fertility: it is repellent at the same time as being an important index to a woman's reproductive potential. In the Greek world, menstruation is the time when women are most fertile. If women are segregated in some structure away from the home during menstruation, it is a highly public event, but it is a different matter if menstrual prohibitions on cooking or physical contact, for instance, are observed only on the domestic level. As with birth rituals, the nature of the evidence for private life makes menstrual ritual hard to trace, although 'menstrual taboos and post-menstrual purification rituals are the norm in world societies rather than the exception',⁶⁰ and one might start by looking at possible Egyptian antecedents. There is a certain amount of rather problematic evidence for female seclusion during menstruation from New Kingdom Egypt, though as far as I am aware it all comes from Deir el-Medina, the town inhabited by the men working on the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and their families. The extent to which this was a typical settlement is problematic.⁶¹ The absences of men from their building work, recorded on a Deir el-Medina ostrakon, are apparently so that they can attend festivals following the final post-partum purification, rather than the menstrual withdrawal, of their female relatives.⁶² Another ostrakon⁶³ from the site seems to refer to the collective menstruation of several women in connection with a 'place of women': whether a communal place outside the boundaries of the town or an individual space in the women's homes is unclear. Synchronic menstruation is a phenomenon that has been observed in women living in close

proximity to each other, and could have happened in the cramped living conditions at Deir el-Medina. How relevant all this may be to later practice is difficult to establish. From the statuettes and wall-paintings found in the spaces under the stairs in New Kingdom private houses, it seems likely that this space was sometimes ‘an area of domestic cult that centred on the ambience of womanhood and the danger and mystery of childbirth’,⁶⁴ and this could also be an appropriate place for secluding the menstruating women of the household. There is some evidence for the place under the stairs being used as women’s cultic space in Roman-period houses at Bacchias in the Fayyum. Demotic texts supply some references to a room called the *hrry.t*, apparently used by women for menstrual seclusion: in a transfer of house property at Thebes recorded in 267 BCE, a woman called Neskhons assigns a share of her house to her younger son, and stipulates that the *hrry.t* be used by his womenfolk during their menstrual periods.⁶⁵ It is uncertain exactly what part of the house is meant by the *hrry.t*, though in the seventh century CE the Coptic equivalent of the term is used to gloss the Greek word *hypopession*, literally ‘the space under the stairs’. Once again this area of the house is apparently associated with the private life of women, though one cannot be sure that the meaning of *hrry.t* = *hypopession* had not changed in meaning over the intervening years.⁶⁶ This evidence, admittedly scattered and flimsy, does seem to point to some form of seclusion of women being observed at different times, and that it went on in the private domain of the home rather than in a special structure outside it.

This, then, may have been the reality of the living bodies of women: frequent childbirth and death, punctuated by squatting in the cupboard under the stairs during menstruation. But with death, the body took on a new and different status, with the liberation of the social body from the constraints of the signifying natural body. In death, married women become nubile nymphs or attractive matrons, depending on their age; males becomes ephebes, athletes or heroes. Both idealisations are responses to physical models created deep within the value system. Thus funerary art can say a great deal about idealised bodily forms in a given culture: and this is what I want to examine next.

Heroes and Tombs: The Ideal Body in Death

In Græco-Roman Egypt, as in dynastic times, it was still hoped that the physical body would be preserved so that the deceased person could be reborn in a perfect and vital form. A Demotic inscription on an early Roman period mummy case makes clear the inextricable link

perceived between preserving the physical body and immortality:

your body is destined for the underworld like a divine falcon. Your bones will live. Your muscles will be firm. All your limbs will be be vital. You will follow Hathor, Lady of the West: she will grant you a rich and efficacious mummification. You will follow Anubis the embalmer ... he will cause your name to reach the hall of the Western Mountains ... your *ba* will live for ever and ever.⁶⁷

The dead body could be given back all the faculties it had had use of during life, especially sexual vigour (Figure 6). Roman-period mummies were equipped with gold nipples or phalli as appropriate, covered with gold leaf over the pubic area, or sometimes gilded across the entire body.⁶⁸ It was even possible for the mummified dead man to engender a child posthumously, just as Osiris had fathered Horus. Therefore the physical body, and its links with the sexual status of the deceased, is an important iconographie preoccupation of the two principal groups of evidence. The first are the so-called ‘Fayyum’ mummy portraits (which actually come from necropolis sites all over Egypt, though a large proportion were found in the cemeteries of the north-eastern Fayyum). The second are the carved stone decorations from the niches of tombs (Figure 7): the latter mostly come from Oxyrhynchus and Heracleopolis, and date from the end of the third century CE to the beginning of the sixth. The people portrayed in these monuments are well-to-do metropolitans who could afford expensive burials. The paintings from Hawara are presumably of inhabitants of Arsinoë, nome-capital of the Fayyum; the niche sculptures represent the urban élite of Middle Egypt. The comparison of these two very different ways of commemorating the élite dead, with individual painted portraits giving way to carved idealised abstractions, may not seem valid, but both memorials still perpetuate fundamental Egyptian ideas about the body, even though the stone niche decorations were produced in a world that was becoming rapidly Christianised. Both means of commemoration seek to personalise the dead by embodying them in forms appropriate to their social role on earth. Most significantly, both sets of images place a strong emphasis on the sexual status of the dead person, displaying an interest in the erotic foci of the body. In the ‘Fayyum’ portraits, young men are depicted in accordance with Greek ideas of male sexual attractiveness, with attention given to torso, eyes and extent of facial hair. The niche decorations detail, in a less allusive way, female reproductivity, with the breasts and pubic area carefully portrayed on young women and marital standing made unequivocal. The bodies of the deceased are thus fixed firmly within the society of the living.



Figure 6 The erotic potential of the dead: Isis, in the form of a hawk, is impregnated by the mummified Osiris. (1st century CE: scene from the inner room of the birth-house of the temple of Hathor at Dendera; after Dasen 1993)



Figure 7 Figure of Daphne from the niche of a tomb. (Late 3rd century CE: Paris,

First, to the 'Fayyum' portraits: and given the nature and function of the funerary image, one must consider how far the bodies portrayed in them can really be called portraits at all. Funerary art exists at the junction between art and social life, representing the deceased in accordance with the value system of that society. The natural features of the deceased may provide some point of reference in the production of the image, but are rapidly replaced by an image built around the social body. The resolution of the portraiture question hinges on whether the Fayyum portraits were produced purely for funerary use and were thus made after death, or whether they were painted and displayed during the lifetime of the person, as has often been suggested.⁶⁹ This is too contentious an issue to discuss here; but even if the 'Fayyum' portraits were produced in the lifetime of their sitters, the fact that they were eventually destined to be incorporated in a mummy must have had an effect on the conventions of physical representation used. To portray their subjects, the artists of the Fayyum portraits employed a narrow repertory of iconography and forms, within which there was comparatively little variation of type: child with youth-lock, young matron with good clothes and jewellery, soldier with studded buckler, and so on. These painters had an extremely limited amount of space to convey much important information about their subjects — only the extent of the head and shoulders, on a piece of wood roughly 15 by 30 cm. After embalming and wrapping, the mummies were kept for an unknown length of time in a funerary chapel before burial, and hence it would have been necessary for the portraits to display an array of visual symbols immediately comprehensible to somebody looking at the painting on the mummy (perhaps several generations after death, when the deceased person had been forgotten as an individual). The decoration and symbolism employed over the entire mummy, of which the portrait likeness was only one element, worked together to provide the most appropriate and effective setting for the rebirth of their owner into the next world. Ironically, the actual bodies inside these magnificent carapaces were often a mess. Standards in mummification had declined since reaching their peak in the late New Kingdom, as Petrie noticed when he examined the bodies behind the mummy portraits from Hawara. What appeared to be a child mummy, equipped with all the external burial trappings, actually consisted of 'an old muddy thighbone, to make up the length, with a shin-bone and an old skull, full of mud ... to give the weight and substance requisite for the body.'⁷⁰

Unequivocal symbols of social status and age category would be

particularly important for those who had died at transitional stages in their lives, particularly the pre-adolescent, who had not yet achieved sexual maturity, and the adolescent male, dead at the peak of his physical and sexual vigour. Therefore it is unsurprising that one of the most clearly differentiated portrait types is that of the adolescent male, post-pubertal and with a slight downy moustache, sometimes little more than ‘peach fuzz’, sometimes rather fuller. About fifty such portraits in encaustic and tempera are known, though some damaged or heavily-restored paintings may also belong to the corpus. The subjects are usually clothed in plain white tunics, but are sometimes shown bare-shouldered, perhaps implying total nudity. On their heads they often wear leafy garlands, some of which are included as part of the original portrait, others stencilled on in gold leaf after painting (see Plate 3). These images constitute a group of portraits quite distinct from those showing males in the two age categories on either side of puberty: those which depict much younger, pre-adolescent boys (sometimes difficult to differentiate from females) wearing the youth-lock and other symbols of childhood such as amuletic necklaces, and those of older, fully adult males in their twenties who are frequently bearded, though still sometimes shown bare-chested (see Plate 4). The ages of these juvenile, post-pubertal males seem to range from about thirteen to the very early twenties, with a slight predominance towards the upper age limit, and this has been confirmed by X-ray examinations carried out on two mummies from Hawara equipped with portraits of moustached, garlanded young men. A young man whose mummy is now in the Manchester Museum was estimated to be aged about 20,⁷¹ and Artemidorus, whose splendid mummy case is now on display in the British Museum, died when he was between 19 and 21.⁷² It is interesting that the mummy portraits of young males pay such attention to the growth of facial hair, the most obvious external sign of maturation in males. Apart from being an indicator of age category, in Græco-Roman antiquity a youth’s slight moustache was a strong erotic focus for both male and female *inamorati*. Praise of youths with ‘their first down more golden than cassidony’⁷³ was a well used literary topos. For the writers of homosexual love epigrams in the twelfth book of the *Palatine Anthology*, the growth of the first beard and other body hair was a standard theme, signifying the end of the boy’s availability for non-reproductive sex and his entry into the world of reproductive heterosexual relations. ‘Now your thighs are hairy and your cheeks bloom with down, and Desire leads you off to another sort of passion,’⁷⁴ complained one of these epigrammatists about his young male lover’s maturation.

Some funerary epigrams preserved from Roman Egypt make clear

the erotic potential contained in the dead body of an élite youth. For instance, the familiar equation of the stages of male maturation, vitality and attractiveness with the extent of facial hair is seen in the second century inscription of Sarapion,⁷⁵ which says 'death's destructive destiny led down the young Sarapion to Hades when he had just completed twenty-two years and was bearded for the first time, he who was charming and gentle to all men.' An even more striking inscription was set up in the Sidi Gaber necropolis of Alexandria in the second century CE.⁷⁶ 'The handsome Heracleides lies here, like Osiris; or like Adonis the lover of Paphian Aphrodite, or Endymion the lover of Selene, or like Heracles, the son of Alcmene, victor in twelve labours.' The comparisons of the dead Heracleides with the doomed human lovers of goddesses emphasise his earthly sexuality and his transition to the divine, as well as his physical beauty. Added to these, the punning comparison of the deceased with Heracles associates him with sporting prowess, the goal of the Hellenised metropolitan male; and the opening statement that Heracleides is like Osiris places him firmly in a mixed religious milieu. In this elegant three-line inscription, Greek and Egyptian ideas about the erotic potentiality of the dead are neatly blended into a harmonious whole.

Similarly, the bare torsos of some of the young men in the mummy portraits point either to divinisation or, more probably, to athleticism which, as the Memphite ephebic inscription quoted above suggests, was such an important part of metropolitan civic identity in Egypt. The portraits of young moustached and garlanded men are idealisations of individuals who died at a specific time in their lives, when they were members of an important, socially-recognised age category. Thus young males in 'Fayyum' portraits have perfect social bodies. The array of symbolism on them makes the social and sexual status of the deceased man unequivocal so that there could be no confusion about the nature of his body in the next world, in just the same way that the famous fowling scenes in Pharaonic tombs show a quintessential image of the deceased surrounded by erotic references: a bewigged wife, a naked daughter, a phallic throwstick.⁷⁷ Doubtless a similar symbolic language underlies women's portraits, but it is less easy to map since the external signs of age category and maturation in women would be difficult to indicate on a head-and-shoulders portrait. However, modelled mummy-cases of women from the same period as the 'Fayyum' portraits and often found in association with them, pay a great deal of attention to the female form, particularly the areas connected with reproduction. Breasts are high and rounded, with prominent nipples which are sometimes further emphasised by being surrounded with rosettes or covered in gilding. The body is clad

in a diaphanous garment, clinging to the full hips and exaggerated belly, which has a prominent navel shaped like a bagel.

The same importance is given to breasts and pubic area in the carved niche decorations, to which I now turn. These sculptures, which for a long time have been consigned to the waste-basket of 'Coptic art', have recently been the subject of a sensitive and insightful study by Thelma Thomas.⁷⁸ She has pleaded forcefully for the niche sculptures not to be considered *in vacuo*, either socially or architecturally. They are products of their environment and, Thomas argues, a response to very specific demands on the part of the patron: they 'illustrate the soul's participation in the cyclical regeneration of the physical world and were especially expressive for the individuals they commemorated. The figurai types and attributes of the pagan divinities, never represented in exactly the same way twice, were carefully chosen to match the characteristics of the divinities with the distinguishing traits of the deceased.'⁷⁹

In the same way that the 'Fayyum' portaits divide their subjects up into idealised lifestages, the niche decorations place their subjects in a taxonomy ordered by identification of the deceased with a divinity appropriate to his or her age and marital category. Thus nymphs are linked with prematurely dead women, and Earth and the Nile appear as symbols for mature and presumably married adults. These broad identifications are personalised by adding attributes to the figure. Older women personified as the fruitful Earth, shown either on their own or associated in a 'watery union' with the fertilising male figure of the Nile, hold sheaves of wheat or swags of cloth filled with flowers. Sometimes they are associated with the lotus, the archetypal Egyptian symbol of fecundity and resurrection. A young married woman depicted as a nymph might perhaps have a marriage belt or *kestos*, or a large circular amulet dangling between the breasts. A good example of one of the latter type of sculptures is a relief of a nymph emerging from a tree, now in the Louvre. (See [Figure 7](#).) The naked female figure, almost aggressively frontal and symmetrically placed, grasps the branches of the tree. Her head is tilted downwards, so that when the carving was set in the niche it would have engaged the gaze of the viewer. Her navel is deeply cut with a drill and the full, rounded breasts have lines incised around the nipples: a ridge separates belly from groin, and the vaginal cleft is also shown. The undercutting of the foliage on either side creates deep shadow and throws the naked figure into greater relief. The visual impact of this sculpture would have been much greater when it was covered with polychromy and incorporated into the tomb wall. Then the contrast between the space of the niche and the solidity of the wall would have made the figure, with its sexual characteristics so strongly defined,

literally leap out at the viewer. When complete, the image must have been an arresting embodiment of idealised female sexuality in its prime.

The Documentary Body

‘A man who has acquired a mirror, or holds in his hand something in which faces are reflected, does not need anyone to inform him or to testify to the character that lies upon him. He himself has become a witness by himself and can speak about his own likeness.’⁸⁰

Paulus, the man who sent this letter (P. Oxy. XXXI 2603) to a certain Sarapion at Oxyrhynchus, was voicing an important truth of the ancient world. The ability to make judgements based on external appearances was a vital life-skill. Every business or social transaction required one to come to decisions about another human. Is the peasant who wants to lease my land reliable? Is the man who is proposing to marry my daughter trustworthy? The ancient pseudo-science of physiognomies taught that the surface mirrored the depths, and what lay on top was an actual reflection, as in Paulus’ mirror, of what lurked below. Therefore mental reduction of a man to the sum of his physical parts was a way of seeing and knowing in the ancient world; and the papyri provide many such examples of real bodies boiled down to a convenient set of metonymic descriptors.

The papyri may provide a welter of information about real bodies, but these references are very much *disiecta membra* which focus on individual body parts rather than on whole bodies. Again, the principal sources are documents. Contracts frequently use standardised physical descriptions of the parties in the subscriptions, and in private letters people sometimes talk about their bodies, usually in relation to some problem with them. I find it significant that there are very few general descriptions of people’s bodies in the papyri, with the exception of the bodies of slaves or people who have been the victims of violence. This collocation may suggest that the only time it was appropriate to talk about a body in its entirety was when it was a passive object.

Descriptions of slaves occur in notices giving details about the appearances of runaways and in documents relating to slave sales. Apart from their very vividness and poignancy, these sketches of individuals are a useful starting point in this discussion, because they are informative about some perceived somatic norms and the differences between the slavish and the free body. In a sense, they can be read as another form of the ancient interest in self-definition through opposition. For the ancients, slaves were no more than bodies, and one of the most common terms for a slave is *šoma*,

literally ‘body’. Yet the physical body of the slave was radically other to that of the free person, but at the same time it was potentially the same, because of the possibility of manumission. There was a danger and tension implicit in this paradoxical difference, which the unflattering descriptions of runaway slaves seem to be expressing.⁸¹ The most detailed of these word portraits is found in a third century CE document (P. Oxy. LI 3617) from Oxyrhynchus. The fugitive, whose name is lost, is

an Egyptian from the village of Chrenes in the Arthribite nome, utterly ignorant of Greek, tall, lean, clean-shaven, with a [small] wound on the left side of the head, honey-complexioned, rather pale, with a wispy beard – in fact, with no hair at all to his beard – smooth-skinned, narrow in the jaws, long-nosed. By trade a weaver, he swaggers around as if he were someone of note, chattering in a shrill voice. He is about 32 years old.

Naturally some of the bodily details are included here for entirely practical purposes, but there is a sub-text to their inclusion. Because he is a slave, he cannot be a ‘real man’, and the adjectives applied to the body of this anonymous slave serve both to set him physically apart and render him ridiculous. He is ugly and beardless, and thus infantile, although 32 years old; and like a child he goes around jabbering away as though he has delusions of grandeur. Stress is also placed on the man’s Egyptianness and his ignorance of Greek, and in general the whole text recalls the derogatory descriptions of indigenous Egyptians in writers such as Juvenal. In his satires he portrays them as sweaty, greasy, squabbling pygmies, who splash around on the Nile in risible miniature boats.⁸²

Similarly conceived but less exaggerated descriptions are found in other documents. The subject of P. Oxy. LI 3616 is a 14-year-old fugitive slave called Philippus, who is ‘pale-skinned, flat-nosed’ and ‘badly-spoken’ (*psellon*). This adjective may mean again that he cannot speak Greek well, or that he has a speech impediment. The fact that he is pale-skinned (*leukochrôs*) may indicate that he is of foreign origin. P. Oxy. XLII 3054 gives an idea of the appearance of the slave Procopton, also known as Aptus, on the day that he was sold in 265 CE. He was ‘aged about 42, white skinned, slightly flat-faced, with scanty eyebrows, shortnosed, scars on the left forehead and eyebrow and jawbone, slight squint’. Procopton is less unflatteringly described than Philippus and the man from Arthribis, perhaps because he is not a runaway; and the mention of his numerous scars evokes a man’s body after a lifetime of hard work and probably hard knocks.

The bodies of the free receive a very different treatment in the

documentary papyri. Detailed descriptions of slaves can be read as another indicator of their servitude: they are passive objects that can be enumerated in the same intimate terms as a piece of property, terms that would be inappropriately objectifying for a free person. Instead, citizens are merely summed up by a series of stock epithets which focusses on particular physical features, usually facial, while ignoring others. Presumably this would have been enough to conjure up rough pictures of standard types in the same sort of somatic shorthand that is used in contemporary lonely hearts advertisements. This very general evocation is then made personal by listing identifying marks, usually scars on parts of the body that are visible when clothed, especially the facial features. Instead of scars, the marks of voluntary bodily modification are occasionally used, such as pierced ears on men or tattoos indicating cultic affiliation.⁸³ The rarity of references to such permanent modifications suggests that they must have been quite unusual and were perhaps culturally problematic, since pierced ears for men were an indication of foreignness and tattoos usually indicated slavish status. Scars do not seem to have had any semiotic charge other than as quite functional markers of individuality. They certainly do not carry the same sort of high-status connotations as, for example, duelling scars did in nineteenth-century Germany.⁸⁴ A subscription to a document might give the names of witnesses, the location of their scars, and follow by stating which personal seal-stone they use as further proof of identity. 'I, Apion son of Zoilus, have witnessed ... I am aged 44, with a scar under the chin, and my seal-stone is an image of Sarapis. I, Apollonios son of Asclepiades, have witnessed... I am aged 70, with a scar by the outside corner of the right eye, and my seal-stone is an image of Hermes' (P. Oxy. III 492.18–24, excerpted). In other texts the images of the signatories become standardised to the extent that the scar becomes the only signifier of individuality: for example, the scribe of a document (P. Oxy. XXXVIII 2843) written in 86 CE described all the men in terms of the routine honey-coloured complexion and long face, but left gaps to fill in the details of their scars.

Ptolemaic period documents in Greek tend to go into more detail and employ multiple body descriptors more than Roman texts. These adjectives occur in a regular order of height, complexion, hair, shape of face, followed by any other distinguishing features, usually scars or peculiarities of the eyes, so that one moves in on the subject gradually, from far away to close up. For instance, Panas son of Pates appears in a document of 100 BCE (P. Adler G13.2.5) as 'aged 45, medium height, honey-coloured, straight-haired, broad-faced, straight-nosed, with a scar under the right eye, and sparsely bearded.' A description of this complexity would be unusual later on, when people

are generally reduced to a more or less standard combination of complexion with head shape. In contrast, documents in Demotic very rarely delineate the parties at all, perhaps through traditional usage rather than because the participants were less 'body aware.' The physical designations were probably applied by the scribe writing the text as the parties sat in front of him, rather than by the individuals concerned themselves. Therefore how somebody is imaged would have depended on how a scribe interpreted the stock descriptive epithets in terms of the person before him, rather, than giving any idea of how that person conceptualised his or her own body. However, these standard epithets do provide an idea of the hierarchy of body parts and features, with eyes, hair and cranial shape each conveying differing amounts of information about the person.

Apart from those referring to beards, the same set of adjectives is used for women and men. Unless it is grey, hair colour is rarely alluded to; presumably most people had various shades of dark hair which was not distinctive enough to be a useful determinant in itself. Instead, the extent of hair or its texture is remarked upon: people are 'straight-haired' (*tetanos*),⁸⁵ 'curly-haired' (*klastos* or *klastothrix*)⁸⁶ 'with balding forehead' (*anaphalontos* or *anaphalakros*)⁸⁷ and 'wispy-bearded' (*spanopôgôn* or *kakopôgôn*).⁸⁸ Even more important are the eyes, and the rich vocabulary used to describe them indicates their symbolic importance in 'a world in which the scrutiny of one's fellow man was not an idle pastime but an essential survival skill.'⁸⁹ As with hair, their colour does not seem to have been very important, although some people are referred to as being 'light-eyed' (*glaukos* or *charopos*). Instead, adjectives referring to the shape of the eyes or their defects are much more common, the latter an uncomfortable reminder of how prevalent eye diseases were (and still are) in a climate like that of Egypt. There are individuals who are 'rather short-sighted' (*hyposkniphos*)⁹⁰ 'one-eyed' (*monophthalmos*),⁹¹ with squints⁹² and cataracts,⁹³ and many who are blind (*typhlos*).⁹⁴ Other than the hair and eyes, the main general foci are the head and face, concentrating on the shade of the complexion and the shape of face. Two sets of adjectives are frequently juxtaposed to describe people. One can be *melichrôs* and *makroprosôpos*, 'honey-coloured' and 'long-faced', or dark-skinned or swarthy (*melanchrôs*) with a round face (*.strongyloprosôpon*): one is reminded of the 'brown and blue' collocation of the modern lonely hearts column. The extent to which 'the Egyptians carefully distinguished themselves from their darker Nubian and Ethiopian neighbours'⁹⁵ is not easy to assess. The documents use a restricted range of complexion vocabulary, but then one might not expect there to be many southerners among the document-writing classes in the provincial cities. By the same token,

pale individuals are not often encountered, and are usually foreigners or slaves. Other people have various degrees of ruddiness, denoted by the adjectives *pyrrhakês*, *hypopyrrhos* and *epipyrrhos*. There are occasional face-shape variants such as *koilogeneios*, ‘with a receding chin’. Noses are usually straight (*euthyrin*) or snub (*simos*).

The rest of the body does not really come into these descriptions other than as a locus for scars. A vague indication of height is given, usually that the person is middle-sized (*mesos*), and some individuals are sometimes said to be well-proportioned (*eumegethos*). Pleasing body proportions were an important preoccupation of ancient physiognomic writers.⁹⁶ There are some instances in a related group of documents of the adjective *hypoklastos*,⁹⁷ possibly to be translated as ‘somewhat stooping’, but a more probable meaning is ‘wavy-haired’. Sensory abnormalities are occasionally referred to, including deafness and dumbness. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no mentions of dwarfs in the papyrological sources, although dwarfs certainly existed in Græco-Roman Egypt.⁹⁸ This silence may reflect the traditional Egyptian view of dwarfism as a generally acceptable physical anomaly, with positive religious associations.

It is a trope of papyrological literature to regard these physical descriptions in documents as being evocative of great individuality. They are supposed to be ‘iconistic portraits of the utmost detail’,⁹⁹ where the dead people of the past are embodied once again as living entities. In fact, if one reads a series of these descriptions, they soon appear more and more impressionistic, so that one seems to be dealing with loosely-sketched types rather than carefully described individuals. The person is reduced to a series of standardised features modified by distinguishing marks, rather like a mask, and it may be significant that ancient accounts of constructing theatrical masks on physiognomic principles read very like papyrus descriptions of people.¹⁰⁰ So these ancient ‘portraits’ of the bodies of real people are perhaps no more than cartoons that are relatively uninformative about what it was like to have and inhabit a body in Græco-Roman Egypt. To gain some sense of that, it is necessary to look at how the acculturated human body was controlled and personally, rather than politically, modified — the subject of the next chapter.

1 Wilcken (1889) 2.

2 Petrie (1911) 8.

3 Swindler (1929) 323.

4 Dupont in Feher *et al.* (1989) 397.

5 Strabo XVII 1.2.

6 Diodorus Siculus I 81–2.

7 Turner (1984) 204.

- 8 For references and discussion, see Dasen (1993) 75.
- 9 Manniche (1987) 35–6 says that these drawings are of people having intercourse, and that they are ‘a pointer to the purpose of the building as a house of pleasure.’ Her drawing of the pictures does not represent accurately the plate in Gabra (1941) 102, plate XLVII (2) that she has used as a model.
- 10 Reymond (1976) 55ff.
- 11 Blackman (1927) 63.
- 12 Blackman (1927) 64.
- 13 Petrie (1890) 24.
- 14 E.g. Strabo XVII 2.5; Diodorus Siculus I 80. On exposure and infanticide, see most recently Bagnall and Frier (1994) 151–3, who argue that it is primarily an urban practice. There are instances of deformed individuals who reached adulthood, such as a woman with so severely cleft a palate that feeding would have been very problematic; a 30-year-old hydrocephalic man who had been partially paralysed since birth; and an adult priest born without a left hand. I am indebted to Joyce Filer for this information.
- 15 The *locus classicus* is P. Oxy. IV 744.8–10, dated 17 June I BCE: ‘If, with any luck, you give birth, let it live if it is a boy, but cast it out if a girl.’ See also Rousselle (1988) 51 and on the question of exposure generally, Harris (1994).
- 16 Stone (1979) 57.
- 17 Hooper (1960) *passim*.
- 18 Hopkins (1983) 225.
- 19 Parker (1983) 48 and nn. 58–60.
- 20 Blackman (1927) 76: ‘a woman remains unclean for forty days after giving birth.’
- 21 SB I 3451: see also the discussion of the forty-day post-partum period by Perpillou-Thomas (1993) 13–14.
- 22 Robins (1993) 83–4. See also Janssen (1980) 141–3, who suggests that the mens absences from work recorded on a Deir el-Medina ostrakon are for celebrations following the post-partum seclusions of their female relatives.
- 23 Robins (1993) 80 and fig. 27.
- 24 Rousselle (1988) 54.
- 25 On the Greek documents generally, see Bradley (1980) 321–5.
- 26 See Robins (1993) 88–91 for references.
- 27 Soranus II 19.
- 28 Bernand (1969) no. 93.
- 29 Janssen and Janssen (1990) 90–8.
- 30 Herodotus II 36–37.
- 31 For reversing circumcision, see Celsus, *On Medical Matters* VII 25.1–2; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XII 241; Soranus II 34. Most of the ancient mentions of *epispasma* refer to Jews who wished to seem ‘Greek’ in the baths or gymnasium: cf. also perhaps P. Lond. VI 1912 92, where Jews are forbidden from having the operation in order to participate at civic games restricted to citizens (reading *epispas* < *m* > *ein* for *epispaiein*).
- 32 For references, see the introduction to P. Oxy. L 3567.
- 33 Marrou (1956) 156–7.
- 34 E.g. P. Oxy. XVIII 2186.11.
- 35 Eyben (1993) 6–7.
- 36 Turner (1984) 204–5.
- 37 Montserrat (1991) 45~7 and 49.
- 38 Published by Tod (1951) 86–89.
- 39 The *mallokuria* is discussed, with references, by Perpillou-Thomas (1993) 14–15 and footnotes 30a–33.

- 40 For references, see Cole (1984) 234 and nn. 8 and 9 and Perpillou-Thomas (1993) H n. 31.
- 41 Strabo XVII 2.5.
- 42 Ambrose, *On the Patriarch Abraham* II 11.78; Galen XIV 706, ed. C. Kuhn (Leipzig 1827, repr. Darmstadt 1965).
- 43 Bulwer (1654) 345.
- 44 Bulwer (1654) 363–4.
- 45 For a detailed description of Sudanese practices, see Kennedy (1970) 175–91. A clear account of the different forms of female genital mutilation in Africa is given by Koso-Thomas (1987) 15–17.
- 46 Aetius of Amida, *On Medical Practice* XVI 115.
- 47 P. Mag. Harris F III 5–10: for discussion, see Montserrat (1991) 48 n. 19. Baines (1991) 144 n. 59 believes that this text is evidence for circumcision being ‘an inherited Egyptian custom, although it is impossible to say how ancient or widespread it was.’
- 48 E.g. P. Kahun, case 28: P. Carlsberg VIII, col. I.xx + 4 – x + 6.
- 49 Paige and Paige (1981) 87.
- 50 Paige and Paige (1981) 53.
- 51 Paige and Paige (1981) 9–14.
- 52 LaFontaine (1985) 109.
- 53 For the inversion theory, see Laqueur (1990) 25.
- 54 My understanding of this text has greatly benefited from discussions with Rebecca Flemming of University College London.
- 55 Strabo XVII 1.46.
- 56 See Montserrat (1990) 206; Montserrat (1991) 47 and n. 15.
- 57 E.g. Fisher (1987) 30: Masai women after their clitoridectomies are known as *ormaisen* ‘girls in healing’.
- 58 Pinch (1993) 351. A possible precedent for a menarche ritual being some sort of public event comes in P. Ryl. Dem. 9, where a 26th Dynasty individual asks permission to marry a priest’s daughter and is told that ‘her time has not yet come,’ presumably meaning that she has not yet reached puberty. This mention in a legal document might suggest that the advent of the girl’s menarche was something of importance outside the home.
- 59 See [Chapter 4](#).
- 60 Paige and Paige (1981) 210.
- 61 See most recently Meskell (1994), with references to earlier literature: she argues that a closer attention to the archaeology of the site may reveal that in many respects it was more normative than often stated.
- 62 See note 22 above.
- 63 Unpublished ostrakon in the Oriental Institute Chicago, OIM 13 512: I am indebted to T. G. Wilfong for the reference to this text, publication of which is forthcoming in the celebratory volume for Prof. Edward Wente.
- 64 Kemp (1989) 305 and nn. 64–6.
- 65 P. Louvre 2424: for discussion see Glanville (1950) 5 and n. 2.
- 66 P Lond. V 1722: for discussion see Husson (1990) 126.
- 67 Smith (1992) 134.
- 68 For gold nipples and phalli, see Petrie (1890) 20. Gilded mummies are listed and discussed by Zimmer (1993) 1–38.
- 69 For detailed discussion, see Parlasca (1966) 59–90; Shore (1972) 27–9. Barbara Borg will discuss the question in the forthcoming publication of her Göttingen doctoral thesis of 1990. The theory that the Fayyum portraits were painted during life seems extremely unlikely to me.
- 70 Petrie (1890) 15.

- 71 Now in the Manchester Museum (Inv. No. 1768): medical findings in David (1980) 32.
- 72 Dawson and Gray (1968) 35: Artemidorus' inventory number is EA 21810.
- 73 Theocritus II 78.
- 74 Palatine Anthology XII 31.3–4.
- 75 Following the text of Rubensohn (1913) 166 = Bernand (1969) no. 79.
- 76 Bernand (1969) no. 76.
- 77 See Robins (1988) 61–4.
- 78 Thomas (1990): full publication forthcoming from Princeton University Press.
- 79 Thomas (1990) 210.
- 80 This letter is usually regarded as Christian. I think that it is tinged with Gnosticism, though probably not explicitly Manichaean.
- 81 There is no doubt that slaves were sometimes a source of fear and tension in Egypt: see Bagnall (1993) 210–12.
- 82 See Juvenal I 26–29; XV 31–2, 124–8.
- 83 For further on male body modification, see [Chapter 3](#) below.
- 84 Bagnall (1993) ^7 suggests that by the late Antique period scars may have acquired an indication of lower status.
- 85 E.g. BGU VI 1258 *passim*; P. Köln I 50.20; P. Ryl. IV 586.31.
- 86 E.g. P. Ryl. IV 581.7; PSI IX 1018.10.
- 87 E.g. BGU X 1971; SB XII 10859.
- 88 E.g. P. Tebt. Ill 814.27.
- 89 Gleason (1990) 389.
- 90 E.g. SB XII 10859.
- 91 E.g. P. Brux. I 10.21.
- 92 E.g. PSI XIV 1402.16.
- 93 E.g. SB X 10571.4; P. Berl. Frisk. I 22.17; P. Ant. Ill 187 fir. a. n.
- 94 E.g. P. Corn. 22.3.73; P. Köln IV 198.7; P. Mich IV 223–5 *passim*.
- 95 Cameron (1990) 288.
- 96 Evans (1969) 40.
- 97 E.g. P. Adi. Gl.1.9.
- 98 Dasen (1993) 155–
- 99 Evans (1969) 39.
- 100 See Webster (1952) 141–50.

The Sensual Body

Sex for Health

Taimhotep, wife of the high priest of Memphis, died on 15 February 42 BCE. She was 30 years old. Her husband Psherenptah set up an elaborate funerary monument to her, carved with a formal speech by Taimhotep. The dead woman exhorts her husband not to cease enjoying the earthly pleasures from which she had been taken away prematurely:

Do not tire of food and drink,
Of drinking deep and love!
Celebrate the festival,
Follow your inclination day and night,
Value the years spent on earth.¹

Psherenptah could justify sexual and alcoholic excess by saying, 'It's what Taimhotep would have wanted.' Her funerary stela demonstrates how sex was intrinsically pleasurable to the Egyptians, but it was much more than that. Sex was also a therapy, a way of maintaining good health in an environment fraught with all kinds of dangers. The act of sex had many physical and emotional benefits for the partners, and these are made clear by the medical writers who were read in Egypt. Indeed, indigenous Egyptian magico-medical lore may have had a major influence on the development of Greek medicine.² Many Greek ideas about physiology, especially that of women, find parallels, if not actual antecedents, in Egyptian texts. One of the most important of these was that the womb was a mobile viscus which could move around independently in the free passage between the vagina and the upper reaches of the body. This idea, very important for the gynaecologies of the medical followers of Hippocrates, is first found in Egyptian medical papyri as early as the Twelfth Dynasty, c. 1850 BCE.³ A woman's body was a breeding bag, constructed around her uterus; and the free passage between her mouth and reproductive organs was the basis for all kinds of diagnostics. Birth prognoses in particular utilised this. They usually work on the principle that if

something pungent, like a head of garlic or an onion, is placed in the woman's vagina, it will be smelt on the breath of the woman the next day if the passage between them is unblocked by a foetus.⁴ The medical writers of the Hippocratic corpus refined such ideas. Women's bodies were thought to be qualitatively different to those of men. For women to be healthy and function properly, their bodies needed to remain colder and wetter than men, in whom hot and dry elements should predominate. Men's bodies were stronger than women's, because their flesh was firmer and hotter, and thus more able to withstand extremes. If a woman became 'unbalanced' and too dry and mannish, her uterus might start to wander. If, for whatever reason, she became too desiccated, her womb might migrate upwards in search of damper regions where its equilibrium could be restored. This might happen if she took too much exercise or engaged in an unsuitable occupation.⁵ Spells to prevent the uterus wandering are found in the Greek magical papyri of the Roman period. This spell (PGM VII 260-71, excerpted) contrives to keep it in its place:

I conjure you, O womb ... to return again to your place, and that you do not turn [to one side] into the right part of the thorax or into the left part of the thorax, and that you do not gnaw into the heart like a dog, but remain indeed in your own intended and proper place.

A better therapy than magic for women was sex. On a theory of physiology which requires women to be regularly wet, penetrative sex has obvious benefits. It irrigates the uterus with sperm, keeping it nice and damp, and consequently in place for its main function – reproduction. Sex is a sensible prophylactic. From this, it follows that every woman from menarche to menopause requires sex to function properly. A well regulated reproductive cycle is of crucial importance for the healthy functioning of the woman. Menstruation, intercourse and childbirth all enable the woman to use her body to the optimum, because they maintain her fluid balance at the correct level. The logic of this Græco-Egyptian pathology dictates that a woman's body is at its most fruitful when the menses are finishing. Earlier Egyptian medical texts stress this by equating menstruation with the annual Nile flood, the paradigm for all fertilising activity.⁶ This knowledge must have been widespread, and would surely have dictated when people actually had sex. Married couples hoping for children may have picked their times for sex to coincide with when the female was thought to be at the peak of fertility; those wanting recreational sex might have waited, employed contraceptives, or practised various methods of non-productive sex. In ancient terms the latter are all potentially deleterious to a woman's health, however, because the

moisturising sperm does not end up in the right place.

The Egyptian womans body, then, needed to open up and close at regular intervals for her to function properly as a sexual entity. Like a womans mobile womb, her body's opening and closure could be regulated by magical means, such as the uterine amulets illustrated in [Figure 2](#). Typically, these stones are engraved with the womb in the shape of an inverted jug or jar, its mouth obstructed by a large key. The uterus image is accompanied by various gods associated with reproductivity, such as Isis, Osiris and Nephthys, or more usually Khnum, the creator god who fashioned man out of clay ([Figure 8](#)). He was the deity who opened up the womb with the key at the appropriate time, celebrated in a hymn from his temple at Esna: 'Glorify Khnum, you pregnant women who have passed their term. For he is ... the god of the house of birth who opens up the lips of the vagina and makes firm the birthing-brick.'⁷ The main function of these amulets may well have been to prevent problems during pregnancy, but this was probably not their only use. Opening and closure had to take place at the appropriate times in the reproductive cycle: opening at menses and childbirth, closing during pregnancy. This rhythm could be achieved by using different magical formulae in conjunction with the inscribed gem.⁸ A liberating formula or inscription on the gem opened up the womb, and a constraining incantation kept it closed and docile. By threatening the womb with dangerous gods like Seth, one could even scare it into submission, indicating with how much autonomy the organ was credited.



Figure 8 The creator god Khnum fashions man upon the potter's wheel. (After Lindsay 1965)

Other problems with women's bodies were controlled medically, and a number of obstetric and gynaecological treatises and recipes have survived among the papyri. There was probably an oral knowledge of regulating sexual health by regimen, diet and traditional Egyptian purgatives, which were thought to cleanse the body of harmful food residues. The writers of private letters sometimes request various kinds of bowel purges.⁹ On a more formal level of medical knowledge, the works of the Hippocratic writers, the gynaecologist Soranus of Ephesus and numerous unknown doctors were all copied and read in Egypt. These observed and treated a wide range of women's problems. One third century CE papyrus,¹⁰ unfortunately very damaged, seems to have dealt with chronic diseases of the womb. The extant fragment refers to violent movement leading to the evacuation of liquid from the womb, possibly after prolapse of the uterus. Another text (P. Hibeh II 191) may have been part of a general work on accouchement: the fragments preserved discuss abortifacient herbs.¹¹ A much earlier papyrus (P. Ryl. III 531), perhaps of the second century BCE, contains a series of recipes to treat hysteria in its

most literal sense of suffocation caused by the migrant womb. It recommends the administration of dried otter kidneys in sweet-smelling wine; the same medicament can be used to evacuate the uterus and cure conditions of the testicles (*didymoi*). The Greek word is ambiguous: *didymoi* can mean the female ovaries or the male testicles. The unknown doctor may have been suggesting that the same therapy is applicable to both men and womens reproductive problems.

In fact, whether women's bodies actually required a therapy of their own was the subject of some medical controversy in Græco-Roman Egypt. Since womens genitalia are fundamentally the same as men's, male and female represent a bodily continuum rather than polar opposites, and thus it follows that even the most quintessentially 'female' maladies associated with reproductive dysfunction are not truly their own. A fourth century CE papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (PSI II 117) is a fragment from a copy of the third book of the gynaecologist Soranus. The Oxyrhynchus text unfortunately coincides with a corrupt passage in the only extant manuscript of Soranus. Here he considers whether women need therapy particularly their own, and cites authorities on both sides of the argument that there are diseases which are peculiar to woman.

In defence of the existence of diseases peculiar to women, arguments such as these are adduced: we call some physicians women's physicians because they treat the conditions of women. And the public is accustomed to call in midwives in cases of sickness when the women suffer something peculiar which they do not have in common with men. Furthermore, the female is by nature (*physis*) different from the male, so much so that Aristotle and Zenon the Epicurian say that the female is imperfect, the male, however, is perfect. Now that which is different in its whole nature (*physis*) will also be subject to its own diseases. Besides, the uterus is a part peculiar to women and the functions of the uterus appear in females alone.

At this point, the papyrus breaks off. On the other side, in a section missing in all versions of the manuscript of Soranus, the papyrus compares the male and female genitalia in rather the same way as the text quoted in the previous chapter (P. land. V 82). The whole section seems to have been part of the familiar argument that the unmarked, unspecified and unqualified human body is male, and that females are just a deviation from this. The Greek text conceals a significant pun: the word for nature, *physis*, is also the word for the genitalia.¹² Human beings are thus constituted around their reproductive organs: male

and female genitalia and the different intrinsic qualities attributed to men and women are inextricably linked.

Sexual activity, then, was a way of keeping women's dangerous bodies under control, and a whole canon of physiological, magical and religious theories was established to perpetuate the idea that penetrative sex and regular childbirth were indispensable for a woman's continued good health. The part played by sex in the healthy regulation of the bodies of men seems to have been rather different. Egyptian medical writers had long been aware of the nexus between the testicles, insemination and conception. In case 854 of the Ebers Papyrus, the great medical text of the Eighteenth Dynasty, it is stated that: 'there are two vessels that go into the testicles: it is these that give the semen.' The semen itself, however, was not thought of as being produced in the testicles themselves, but by the spine, underscoring the intrinsic link between phallus and backbone. Semen is created or fixed within the bones. Religious texts about Khnum, the creator god, elaborate on this idea. In a hymn on the walls of the Ptolemaic temple at Esna, for instance, he is said to 'knot the flow of blood to the bones' and 'bind the blood with semen in the bones'.¹³ The notion that semen and bone-marrow are linked may have come about via the characteristically Egyptian trick of finding affinities between things that have an intrinsic visual similarity, such as semen and bone-marrow. More important, however, is the way that the value of sperm is emphasised. It is something which is not easily produced, coming from the spine, the pillar which keeps the body upright and makes man distinguishable from beasts. Therefore it should not be spent easily.

Men were thought to put more physical effort into sex than women, perhaps an expression of the male/active female/passive dichotomy that characterises ancient sexual relationships. The male body was hotter and dryer than a woman's, and the sperm it produced was believed to form the bones of the foetus, because the sperm originated in the bones. The woman's body, being cold and wet, formed the flesh. The Jumilhac papyrus, a medico-magical text of the late Ptolemaic or early Roman period, states this explicitly: the bones of the foetus belong to the male principle, and the flesh to the female. The equations are clear. Men are dry like bones, therefore their generative principle produces bones: women are wet like flesh, so they produce flesh. Because the man needs to generate heat for the semen to be produced, the act of sex is more exhausting for him.¹⁴

The medical writers read in Roman Egypt, including Soranus, all discuss the potential dangers of ejaculation for men. Because sexual intercourse for men involves the draining away of a precious vital fluid, it should be carefully regulated in order to optimise the chances

for conception.¹⁵ When a man did need to have sex, heterosexual intercourse was strongly advised, because it was less energetic and consequently a better therapy.¹⁶ The idea that sex is a dangerous waste of sperm for men has had a surprising longevity. In 1922, the sexology and birth control pioneer Marie Stopes gave advice to men with which Galen and Soranus would have agreed: 'it is ... the greatest mistake to imagine that the semen is something to be got rid of frequently – all the vital energy and nerve-force involved in its ejaculation and the precious substances which go into its composition can be better utilised by being transformed into other creative work on most days of the month.'¹⁷

Naturally one has to be very careful about using medical writers like Galen and Soranus, or the unknown authors of the Egyptian therapeutic treatises, as sources for ancient sexual activity. One need only think of the contemporary dissonance between popular practice and medical advice about drinking, smoking and safe sex. Just because Soranus and the others counselled infrequent sexual intercourse does not necessarily mean that they had much effect on how most people conducted their sexual lives. Is one to imagine that a man at Oxyrhynchus or Hermopolis thought twice about having sex because scientists thought that it involved an enervating waste of sperm? However, the ancient texts of medical or pseudo-medical content are useful in my broader field of enquiry: to consider what it was like to inhabit a human body in Graeco-Roman Egypt. The body was a means of classification, and discourse on the body was a means of defining and differentiating human experience. Above all, ancient theories about the sexual usage of the body were strategies for understanding puzzling differences: differences between women and men, between slave and free, between the bestial and the human. Because the body is a metaphor for society at large, ancient concepts of the body perpetuated the social differences between individuals composed of the same basic materials. The physiologists created a sliding scale of humanity, with hot, dry men at the top, passing on to cold, wet women, then down to dumb, passive slaves and finally beasts. The dividing line became more and more blurred the lower down the scale one went. Such ideas, however vaguely understood or indistinctly felt, must have had some effect on how people wore their bodies as they moved through time and space.

The human body was physically given; but at the same time it was also culturally formed and adapted. It was not necessarily a monolithic object, but something mutable. In the rest of this chapter, I want to examine how people in Graeco-Roman Egypt changed their bodies in both permanent and reversible ways, and what effect this may have had on their sexual experiencing of their bodies.

Perfumes, Poisons, Razors and Sex

The Egyptian women knew that Eros does not favour nature herself, but nature embellished and elaborated ... now the body is perfumed. Now it is painted with colours which add a soft gleam to its skin and emphasise all its beauties. Even the gleam of the eyes is enhanced by plant juices. And now the charming role, itself a perfume, is moulded to breast and hips. And now the body is adorned by the master's loveliest gifts – gold, precious stones and jewellery ... cleanliness and care of the body are desirable in themselves. But Eros stands unseen behind them.¹⁸

Just as the Egyptians were supposed to be the quintessential astrologers and magicians of antiquity, they were also supposed to be the most proficient cosmeticians and perfumers.¹⁹ Astrological writings from Egypt stress the connections between magic, cosmetics, perfumes, poisons and sex. Ptolemy, the Alexandrian astrologer, says that under the control of Aphrodite, goddess of love, are

those whose business lies among the perfumes of flowers and unguents, in wine, pigments, dyes, spices and adornments, such as sellers of ointments, garland-weavers, innkeepers, wine-dealers, druggists, weavers, spice-dealers, painters, dyers and sellers of clothes. Under Cronus are dealers in goods for pleasure or adornment, sorcerers, poisoners, procurers, and those who make their living from similar occupations.²⁰

The link perceived between knowledge of the occult and knowledge of cosmetics is not coincidental. Both seek to bring about a more desirable state by altering the status quo through informed human intervention, and therefore both can be seen as spheres of sexual science. Cosmetics and magic are qualitatively the same, since both can be used to entrap. This idea finds its ultimate personification in Cleopatra, the symbol *par excellence* of dangerous knowledge in antiquity. The ancient (and modern) fictions of her as a vampiric seducer and erotomaniac are well known. But hand in hand with her physical knowledge about sex, acquired through long experience, went a knowledge of all the arts of the whore. Cleopatra is supposed to have known about scents, contraceptives, abortifacients, cosmetics, medicaments and even alchemy, and pseudonymous treatises on these subjects were attributed to her. Some of pseudo-Cleopatra's writings ended up in the compendia of the works of famous doctors, such as Galen and Aetius of Amida. They are certainly spurious, but the fact that the unknown author chose to attribute them to her in the first

place shows that there was a perceived link between sexual and cosmetological gnosis. Here is a translation of one of Cleopatra's cosmetic recipes, the long sought-after baldness cure:

For bald patches, powder red sulphurate of arsenic and take it up with oak gum, as much as it will take. Put on a rag and apply, having soaped the place well beforehand. I have mixed the above with foam of natron and it worked well. The following is the best of all, efficacious for fallen hair, when applied with oil or pomade: it is also efficacious for eyelashes that have fallen out, or for people who are losing their hair over their whole bodies. It is wonderful. Of domestic mice, burnt, take one part; of horse-teeth, burnt, one part; of vine, burnt, one part; of bear-grease, one part; of deer-marrow, one part; of reed-bark, one part. To be pounded when dry and mixed with a sufficient quantity of honey until it takes on the consistency of honey.²¹

Here the Egyptian whore-queen uses her knowledge, a concomitant of her sexual experience, in a positive way to remedy the inadequacies of nature. She is a sculptress of the sensual body.

Cosmetics, clothing, scent, and various means of depilation are all ways in which the human body is moulded to conform to notions of attractiveness and thus made more pleasant to inhabit. There is no doubt that the Egyptians of the Græco-Roman period were well aware of the physical joys of these commodities. Kohl sticks, used to draw attention to the eyes, the principal erotic focus, were known as 'pleasure wood', and it is no surprise that they occur as an ingredient in love magic.²² But just like sex, scents, ointments, dyes and perfumes were all therapeutic. They enclosed great transformative powers, which in the right circumstances could have positive effects. It is not helpful to apply the modern distinction drawn between dyes, scents, medicines and cosmetics to the ancient world. Since all were composed of comparable ingredients, they could move between categories of use in a way that contemporary cosmetic preparations cannot. Thus *kyphi*, a sort of incense used in religious ritual, could also be dissolved to perfume wine, taken in pill-form as a laxative, added to body-ointments, chewed like gum to sweeten the breath, or inhaled as a fumigant to promote a general sense of physical well-being. Plutarch gives an account of the healing properties of *kyphi*:

Because most of the ingredients are odoriferous, they emit a sweet breath and a health-giving exhalation, by which the air is changed; while the body, being moved by the aroma softly and gently, acquires a temper that seductively brings on sleep,

so that without getting drunk, the sorrows and tensions of daily anxieties are loosened and untied like a tangle of knots. This exhalation brightens and polishes the imaginative and prophetic qualities of dreams, like a mirror ... to charm and heal the passionate and irrational part of the soul.²³

It was a penance, a sign of mourning, to deny oneself the pleasures of selfadornment, bathing and anointing. The doorway into the Roman baths at el-Arish in the Delta were decorated with a mosaic saying 'enjoy your bath'.²⁴ In a well known letter (P. Oxy. III 528), the abandoned Serenus writes to Isidora, 'I want you to know that ever since you left me I have been in mourning, weeping by night and lamenting by day. Since you and I bathed together on 12 Phaophi I have not bathed or anointed myself for a whole month.' By denying himself the therapeutic and prophylactic properties of baths and unguents, Serenus was not only showing his grief, but also exposing himself to risk. In this context, bathing became an almost religious observance. In around 118 CE, a woman called Eudaimonis sent a letter (P. Flor. III 332) to her son Apollonius about some family problem:

You don't recall that two months ago I went to see the intractable Discas, who wouldn't wait your arrival. Now, together with some cohorts from the gymnasium, he is planning how to attack me in your absence. ... I've already done my part and neither bathed nor worshipped the gods because of my fears about your unsettled case.

If it was potentially a hostile act to be neglectful of physical care, by the same token it should not run to excess either. This was especially true for women who, being weaker, were thought to be particularly vulnerable to the seductive lure of jewellery, fine garments, scent and cosmetics. The social danger posed by women who pandered to their sensual bodies is theorised at some length in a most interesting second century CE papyrus now in Copenhagen (P. Haun. II 13). The text is an anthology of the literary letters ostensibly exchanged between the women of Pythagoras' intellectual circle. A whole body of moralising literature, rather in the 'advice to young ladies' genre, was attributed in antiquity to these Pythagorean women: for instance, a famous treatise about the harmony and continence of the ideal woman was supposed to have been written by Plato's mother, Perictione.²⁵ The Copenhagen papyrus preserves the letter from Melissa to Clearete and the beginning of one from Theano to Euboule. To make their content more comprehensible, the letters have been transcribed from the dialect of Greek in which they were originally composed, Doric, into

koinê, the Greek spoken in Egypt. From this, it is tempting to suppose that letters of the Pythagorean women were used as indoctrinational material for the young, though it is impossible to say whether for girls or boys. All these Pythagorean writings vigorously advocate the virtue of *sôphrosynê*, impossible to translate by a single word but containing associations of balance, self-control, continence and moderation – the ideal attributes of woman. Lack of *sôphrosynê* leads to *akolasia*, an unbridled appetite for the sensual. The didactic writings of the Pythagorean women are a counterpart to the didactic writings of prostitutes like the fabled Philaenis, author of a famous sex manual (see [Chapter 5](#)). The first preach moderation and the second excess, but both are predicted on a single idea – women are inherently sexual, and therefore sex is the only subject on which women can have opinions of any authority. In the first letter, Melissa advises Clearete about the way that a woman who possesses *sôphrosynê* should behave with regard to bodily adornment:

 Melissa to Clearete, greetings. You appear to me to have more than beauty spontaneously; for your wish to learn seriously about the orna-mentation of women gives me a fine hope that you will act in accordance with virtue. Therefore it is right for the woman who is free according to the law, and who possesses *sôphrosynê*, to go into her husband in silence, smartly turned-out in clean white garments, which should be simple and not extravagant, of single weave, and not embroidered or over-decorated. She ought to resist purple garments and luxurious fabrics shot through with purple or gold thread. For such things may be useful tools for prostitutes trying to track down legions of men, but the best ornament of the virtuous woman is character, not clothes. It is necessary for the free and well-balanced woman to be beautiful for her husband, but not too much so: she should have in her appearance the blush of modesty, which is better than the blush of rouge or white-lead makeup. It is better to be noble than over-adorned, and better to have virtue than gold or emeralds. For it is not fitting for the virtuous woman to esteem extravagance of clothing or body adornment; and with regard to household management and security of the home, it is necessary for the virtuous woman to satisfy her husband and fulfil his wishes.... for she ought to believe in the beauty of her soul rather than the beauty which lies in wealth or visible things. For time, malice, sickness and fate destroy the things that pertain to wealth and the body; but the good order of the soul outlasts worldly possessions until death.

The person who copied the letter in its *koinê* version made some significant elaborations to the text. He or she added several nouns and adjectives to lengthen the inventory of dangerous commodities and make the items sound richer and more luxurious. Melissa makes several observations about the status of the woman's sensual body. Too much vulgar adornment will give the wrong signals, she says: people will think that the woman is a slave or a prostitute, the polar opposite of her true status as a controlled, reproductive wife.

Clement of Alexandria, the second-century Christian apologist, takes the essential mendacity of feminine adornment even further. His polemic is interesting because he sets this falsity in an unequivocally Egyptian milieu, though his discourse is partly aimed at rubbishing Egyptian paganism and animal cults. The bodies of women who adorn themselves too much are like Egyptian temples, he says. They have impressive exteriors, brilliantly painted and decorated with metal fittings and imported stones. However, if you go inside to see the god honoured by all this magnificence, it is an anticlimax: in the holy of holies there is only an animal asleep on a pillow. In the same way, women who curl their hair, paint their cheeks, use eye-paint and hair dye are imitators of the Egyptians. Everything is on the surface. When you draw back the dissimulating veil of adornment, what lies within is false, ugly and bestial.²⁶

In pagan funerary contexts, however, Clement's luxurious commodities could have a positive erotic symbolism. Female mummy portraits hint at this. Like the mummy portraits of men, those of women represent them at the apogee of their sexual vitality, in the hope of replicating the physical form in which the deceased would be reborn in the next world (see Plate 5). Commodification is an important part of this eroticisation. The women of the mummy portraits are elegantly dressed in fabrics coloured with expensive dyes, and decked in jewellery set with the most prized stones, pearls, amethysts and emeralds. An array of different kinds of finger-rings, bracelets, ear-rings, necklaces and hair-ornaments is shown. In this respect, mummy portraits do not differ from Pharaonic tomb paintings which show women as ideal eroticised objects, dressed and adorned in ways that have comparatively little real-life referent. They wear figure-exposing, skin-tight garments, which bear little relation to the remains of actual clothing; they are bewigged, covered in jewellery, their eyes heavily made-up with kohl and galena. Dynastic funerary art even appeals to the sense of smell. The famous 'cones' shown balanced atop wigs, conventionally supposed to be of scented wax or fat that would melt and perfume the hair, are more probably iconographic shorthand to indicate that the woman is wearing scent. They are the Egyptian equivalent of a Chanel No. 5 bottle. In short,

Pharaonic funerary images of élite women literally smell of sex. Although the pictorial conventions of Græco-Roman funerary art from Egypt do not allow for the depiction of cosmetics and scent on portraits, these might well have been an implicit part of the image's erotic charge: scent bottles and cosmetic implements were placed in women's tombs at this period. No wonder that a turn-of-the-century Egyptologist, aghast at the repertory of adornment on Roman female mummies, called them 'bedizened granddaughters of the last days of paganism'.²⁷

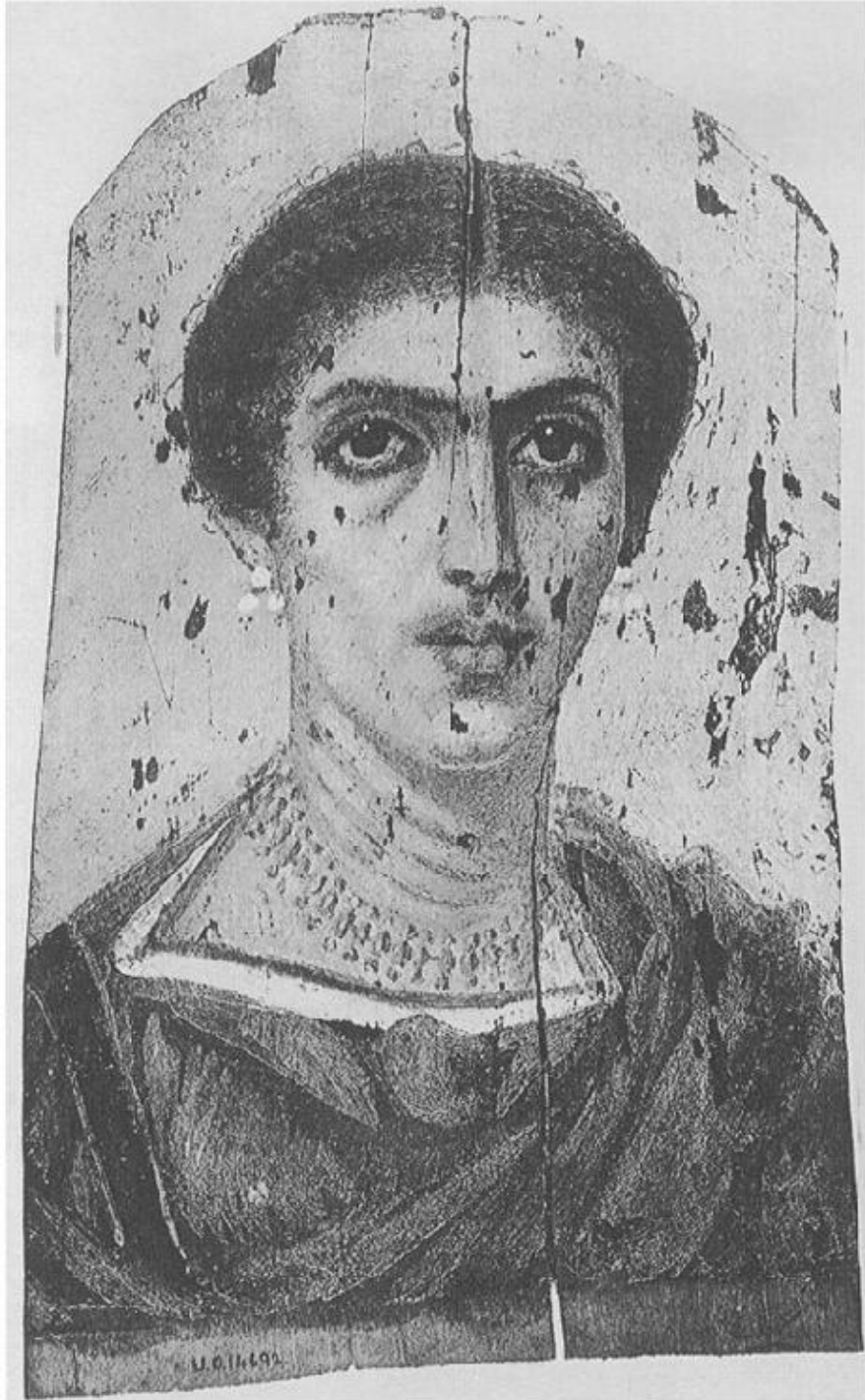


PLATE 5 Mummy portrait of a woman from Hawara, Fayyum, with elaborate jewellery and garments. (2nd century CE: UC Inv. 14692; reproduced by courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London)

What range of cosmetics and perfumes was available? Ancient natural historians like Pliny the Elder and Theophrastus list the aromatic plants exported from Egypt and their properties: resin, myrrh, frankincense, seselis, asphalt, lotus, dock, cardamom, orris root, myrtle, henna, rose, almond oil, cinnamon, quince, palm oil. They also say that the best unguents and ointments came from Egypt because the climactic conditions there are the most suitable, particularly in the Delta.²⁸ Cosmetics and perfumes are not easy to locate in the documentary papyri with any certainty, however. Many lists of plants and oils are preserved, but because cosmetics and perfumes are composed of the same substances as dyes, paints and medicines, one cannot be sure what product was destined to be made from these raw materials. Like all luxuries, Egyptian cosmetics were not cheap. Just as nowadays, their commodity value was enhanced by decanting them into small, attractive pots or glass vessels. They even had enticing brand names which advertised their supposed effects. If they had enough money, people in Græco-Roman Egypt would have been able to beautify themselves with cosmetic products called 'bloom of youth' and even 'elixir of Aphrodite'.²⁹

Such preparations would surely have been produced for women as consumers. The extensive use of scents and cosmetics by men was an ancient Egyptian practice which does not seem to have continued. The cosmetic treatments most usually mentioned in respect of men's bodies are shaving and various kinds of depilation. Classical writers on Egypt manifest some interest in Egyptian shaving and hair-removal rituals, perhaps because of their religious connotations. The Isis priest with his hairless scalp and body must have been a familiar figure on the streets of many towns in the Hellenistic world.³⁰ Hair cutting and shaving were also closely associated with some Egyptian rites of passage for boys. How a man went about ridding the body of excess hair had many connotations of how 'masculine' he was. Shaving the face with a razor was acceptably manly: *dépilation* of the body or face by any other means, such as plucking out with tweezers, singeing or using a hair-loosening poultice, was definitely not.³¹ Clement of Alexandria in particular associates using depilatories with effeminacy and sexual inversion. A man's body hair had a great semiotic importance, placing him on the top of the ascending scale of body supremacies concocted by ancient physiologists. Hair is a sign of the internal bodily heat which inscribes a man's innate claim to physical superiority. In Christian rhetoric, those who play around with the external signs of manliness are suspected of trying to overturn the claims to male privilege that they encode. Like the transgressive, active women who become too dry and masculine, depilated men become wet and feminine, appropriate bodies for passive sex. Wearing

a beard, then, enabled the man to face the world with confidence, knowing that he was displaying an unequivocal sign of his sexual potency and his position at the top of the somatic hierarchy (see Plate 4).

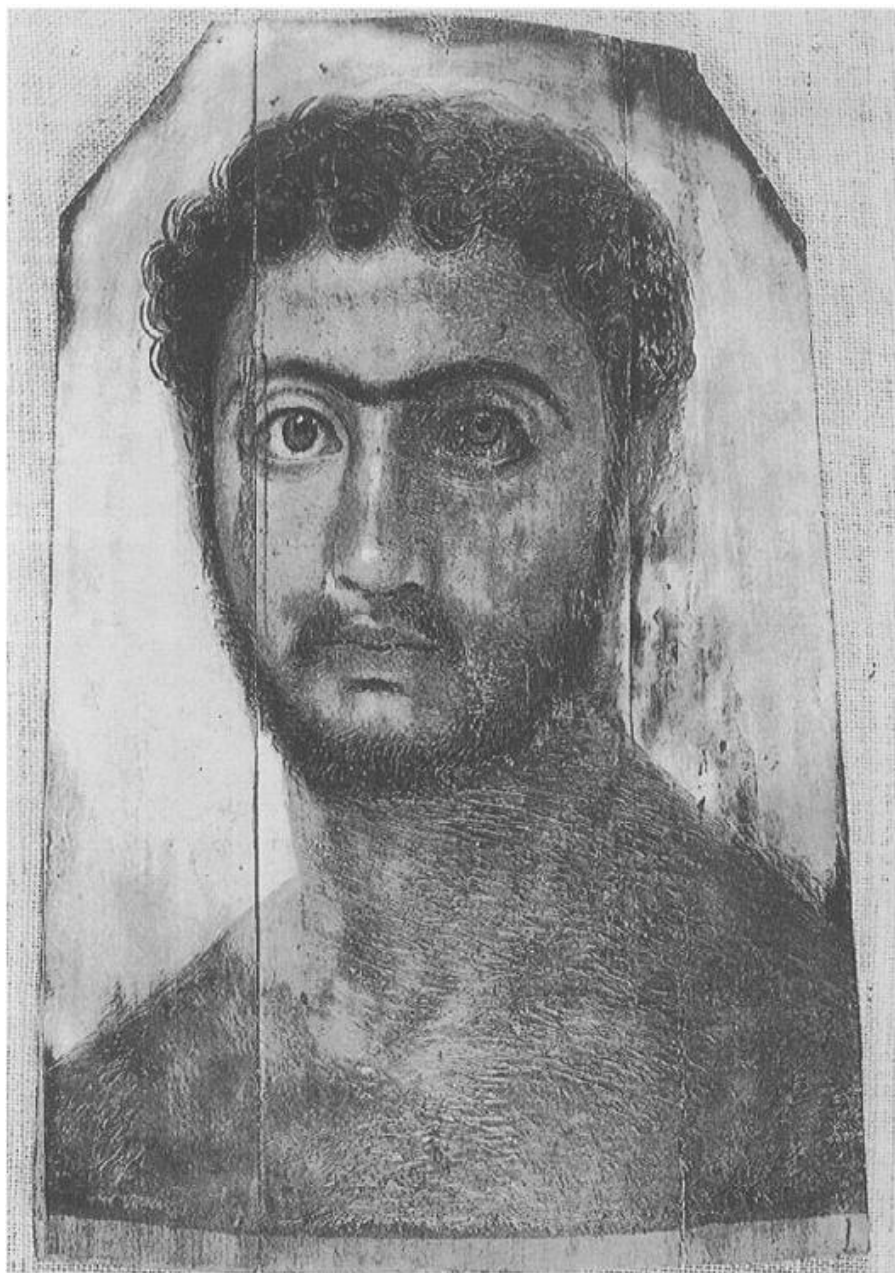


PLATE 4 Mummy portrait of a man from Hawara, Fayyum. His nudity and more extensive facial hair indicate that he is at the lifestage beyond that of the boy in the previous plate. (Late 1st century CE: UC Inv. 19610; reproduced by courtesy of the

There may be a practicality behind all this: shaving with blunt bronze razors and no soap must have made the whole process rather uncomfortable, even if water was used as a lubricant. In a letter (O. Claud. 174) a man called Isidorus, travelling across the Eastern desert from Coptos to the Red Sea, wrote with some relief, 'it seems to me that, since we are in the desert, it is not necessary for us to shave.' Other texts also suggest the penance that shaving must have been. Regulations enforced on the members of a club at Tebtynis in the Fayyum during the reign of Tiberius stipulated that if a club member or one of his family died, the others would have to shave their heads as a sign of mourning. If this was not observed, the miscreant was to be fined 4 drachmas.³²

These ways of altering the body so that it would function differently as a sexual entity are all ephemeral. Cosmetics would be washed off, dyed hair grow out, scents fade. More radical and permanent modifications would have left their mark for life, however: and it is to these that I want to turn now.

Irreversible Body Modifications: Piercing, Tattooing, Branding

A rather arbitrary distinction has been drawn here between some kinds of permanent body alteration and others. Changes made during the course of a *rite de passage* or other initiation have already been discussed, and here I am more concerned with modifications that are essentially decorative or used as marks of body status. The best attested form of permanent body transformation in Egypt is tattooing, though even for this the evidence is not extensive. This silence probably reflects social realities: body altering is not the kind of transaction that would make much impact on the documentary record, especially since more radical forms seem to relate to subordinate groups like slaves.

Tattooing is a phenomenon which occurs globally, but social considerations determine the individual who will receive the tattoo, the image tattooed, and the area of the body where it will be placed. In some cultures, such as the ancient peoples of the Black Sea area, tattooing seems to have been confined to the ruling élite, whereas in others, like modern Southern India, it is taken as a sign of belonging to subordinate groups. Some communities, like the Greenland Inuit, tattooed only women, others only men. In Egypt, there had been a tradition of tattooing for both aesthetic and religious reasons

documented as far as the pre-Dynastic period in the fourth millennium BCE.³³ Most tattooed individuals were women, and erotic attraction seems to have been an important element in the location of some tattoo designs: certain dancers, for instance, were ornamented with series of tattooed dots in the upper thigh, abdominal and pubic region. Other kinds of tattoo probably carried a strong apotropaic charge, such as the figures of Bes, the presiding deity over women's reproductive lives, which are shown tattooed on women's thighs in New Kingdom drawings. It is important to remember that then, as now, tattoos probably had a polyvalent symbolism in addition to their decorative properties. A tattoo of Bes, for instance, could be at the same time an indicator of sexual status and cultic affiliation as well as putting the wearer under the protection of the god. Tattoos could also indicate foreign or captive status: trussed figures of the traditional enemies of Egypt, such as Libyans, are shown in paintings with marks indicating tattooing or cicatrization.³⁴

Although there was no hiatus in the practice of tattooing, its semiotics seem to have changed somewhat between the Pharaonic and the Græco-Roman periods. Along with most other forms of permanent body modification, such as branding, tattooing usually carried negative connotations of barbarism and servitude in the Hellenistic and Roman world.³⁵ Tattoos were inflicted on slaves or malefactors as a punishment, a permanent signifier to their subordinate bodies. As the tattooing needles bit into the skin, they announced that the body being tattooed was penetrable and passive, the ultimate mark of subservience in the ancient world. Thus even cultic tattooing, which marked the devotion of an initiate to a god, was regarded with some suspicion, because of the symbolic penetration implicit in the tattoo.

The extent to which individuals were regularly tattooed in Græco-Roman Egypt is difficult to assess. The Stoic writer Sextus Empiricus says that the majority of Egyptians are tattooed,³⁶ but this passage probably cannot be taken literally because Sextus is using the strange body customs of Egypt as a yardstick for measuring what is normative elsewhere. An argument against widespread tattooing might be its rarity among descriptions of individuals in documents, though this could be because other deviations from bodily norms, such as scars or eye-defects, were considered more potent markers of individuality. In certain document subscriptions,³⁷ men are occasionally said to be 'tattooed to some extent' (*estigmenos hêsychê*). Unfortunately, it is never stated what the tattoos represent, for instance if they are marks of cult membership, nor where they are situated on the body. Again in contrast to the Pharaonic period, there are no examples of women being tattooed, though this may be an argument *ex silentio*.³⁸

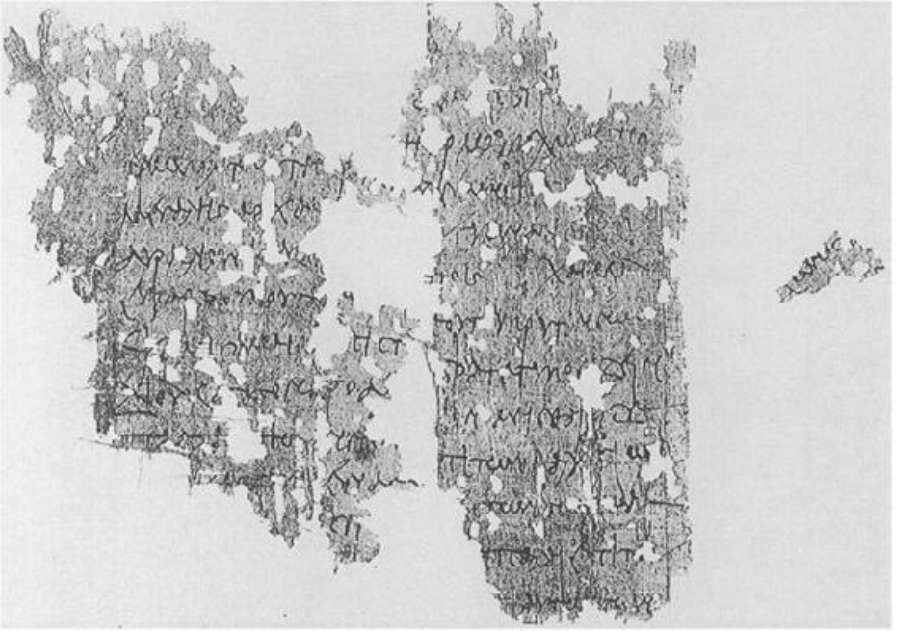


PLATE 1 A typical papyrus, preserving a letter from officials at Hermopolis; the other side was used for an erotic sketch (Plate 19 above). (Early third century CE: private collection)



PLATE 2 Mummy portrait of Hermione, 'educated woman', from Hawara, Fayyum.
(c. 25 CE: Girton College, Cambridge. Inscription = SB I 5754; reproduced by
permission of the Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge)

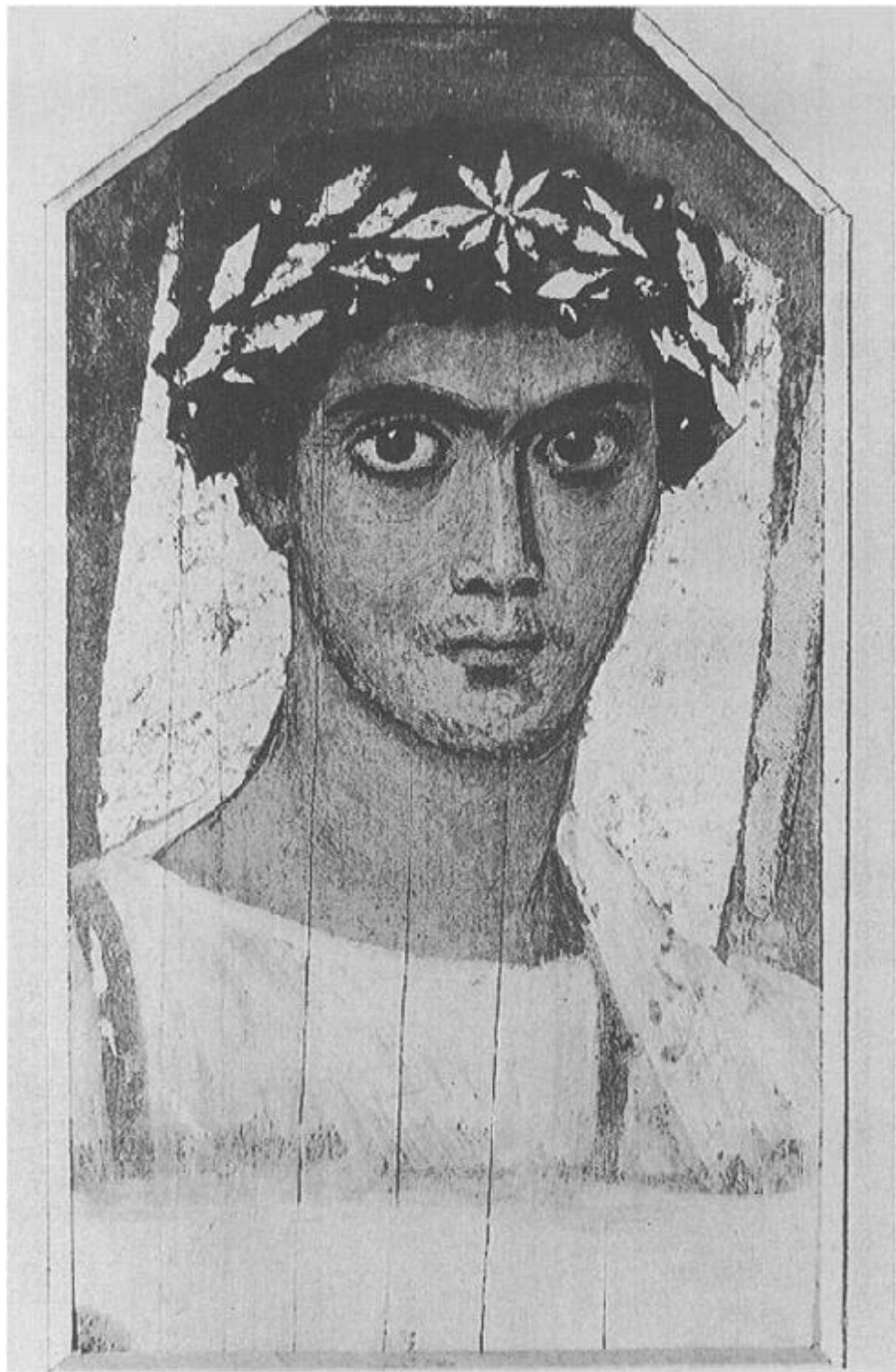


PLATE 3 Mummy portrait of an adolescent boy from Hawara, Fayyum. His garland and small moustache make clear his social and sexual status. (Early 2nd century CE: Moscow, Pushkin Museum, Inv. 6154/1 la 5776)

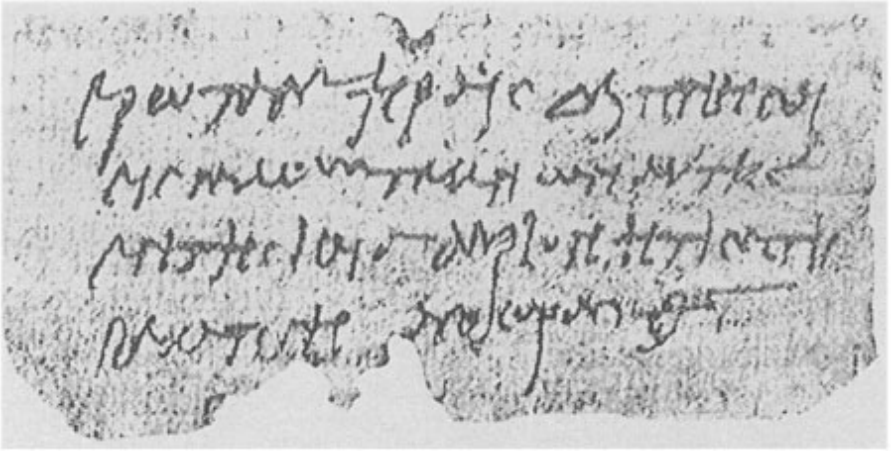


PLATE 6 Papyrus preserving an invitation from Heraïs to the wedding of her children, from Oxyrhynchus. (P. Oxy. I 111, 3rd century CE)

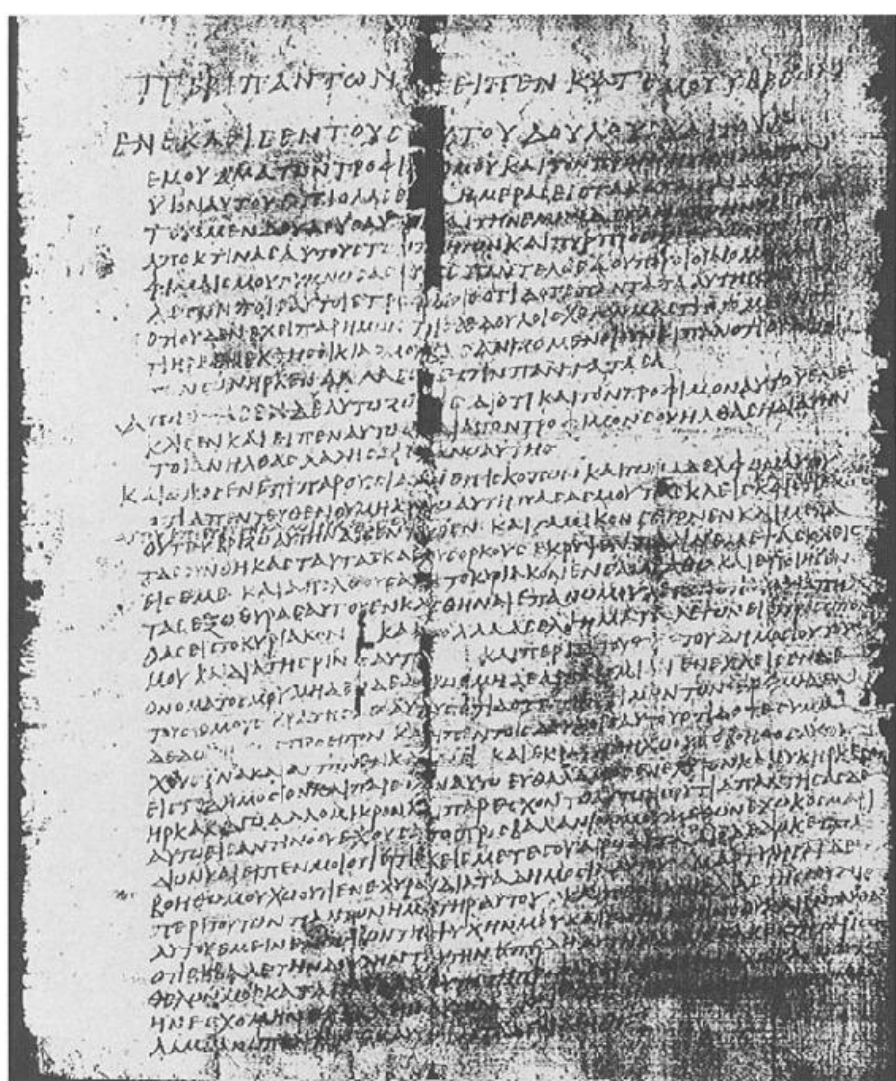


PLATE 7 Papyrus recording a wife's complaint about the brutal behaviour of her husband, from Oxyrhynchus. (P. Oxy. VI 903, early 4th century CE: Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey)

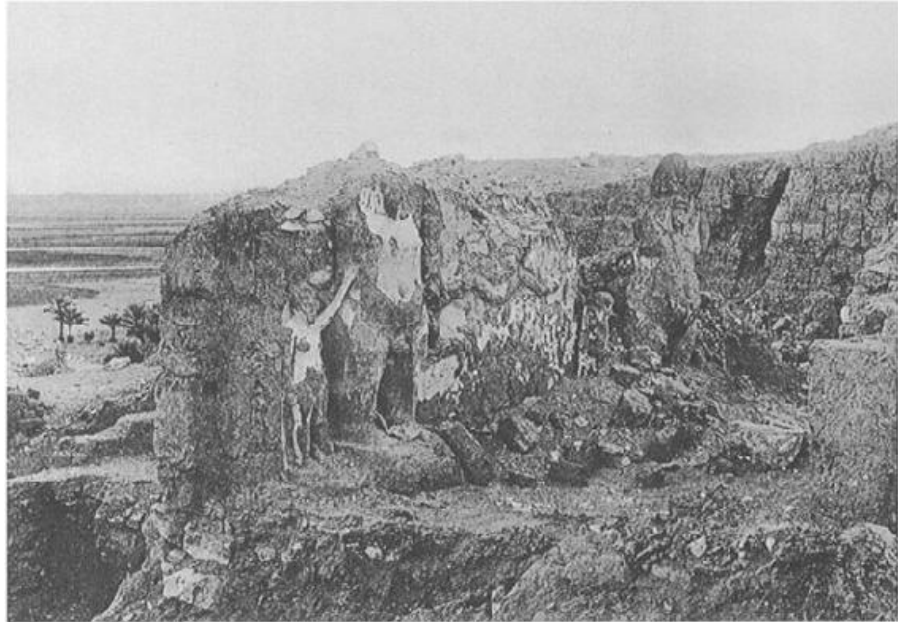


PLATE 8 The 'Bes chambers' at North Saqqara. (Reproduced from Quibell, 1907, pl. XXVI)

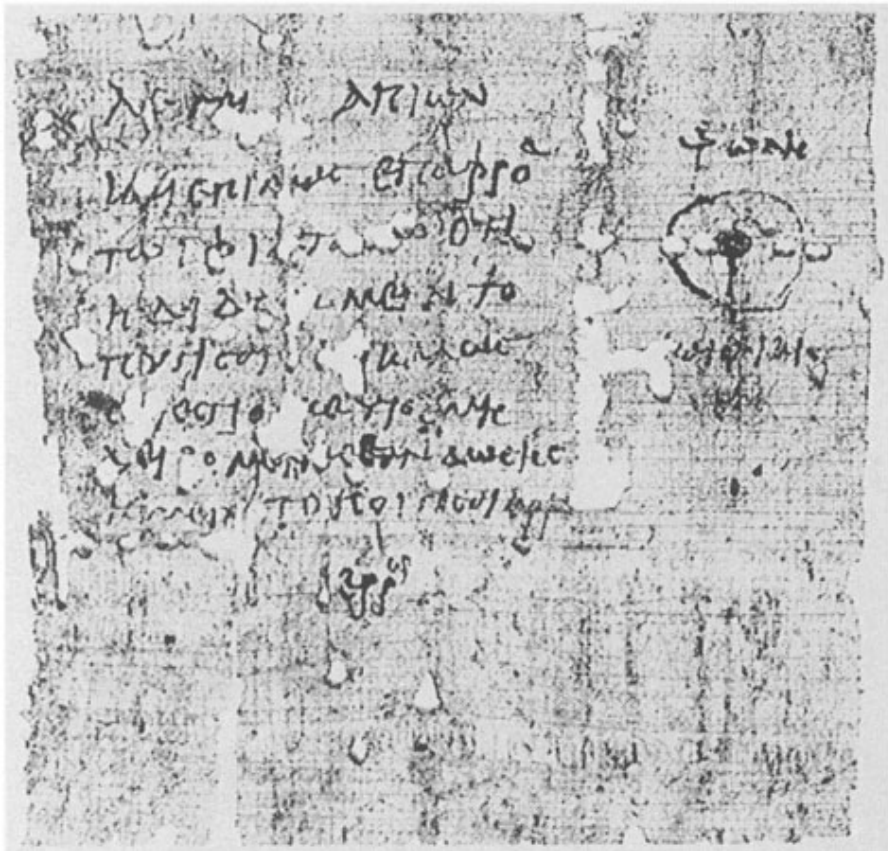


PLATE 9 Papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus with a homosexual proposition. (P. Oxy. XLII 3070, 1st century CE: reproduced by courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society)



PLATE 10 Mummy portrait of Eutyches, freed slave of Cassianus, from the Fayyum.
(c. 180 CE; Metropolitan Museum, New York, Inv. 18.9.2; inscription = SB XVI
12341; gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1918)

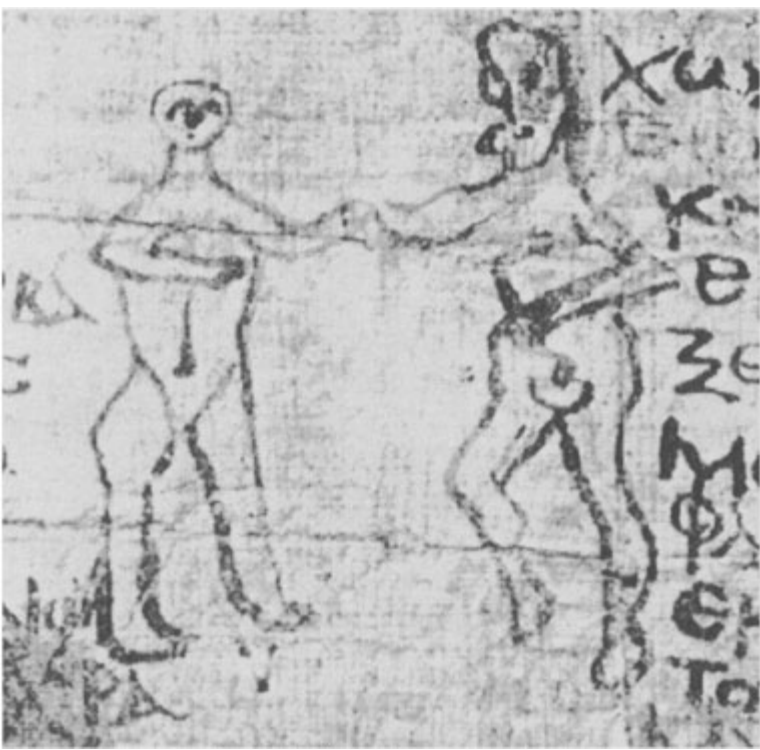


PLATE 11 Drawing on a magical spell, perhaps of homosexual import. (PGM LXVI, 4th-5th century CE; Cairo museum; photograph courtesy of the Association International des Papyrologues)

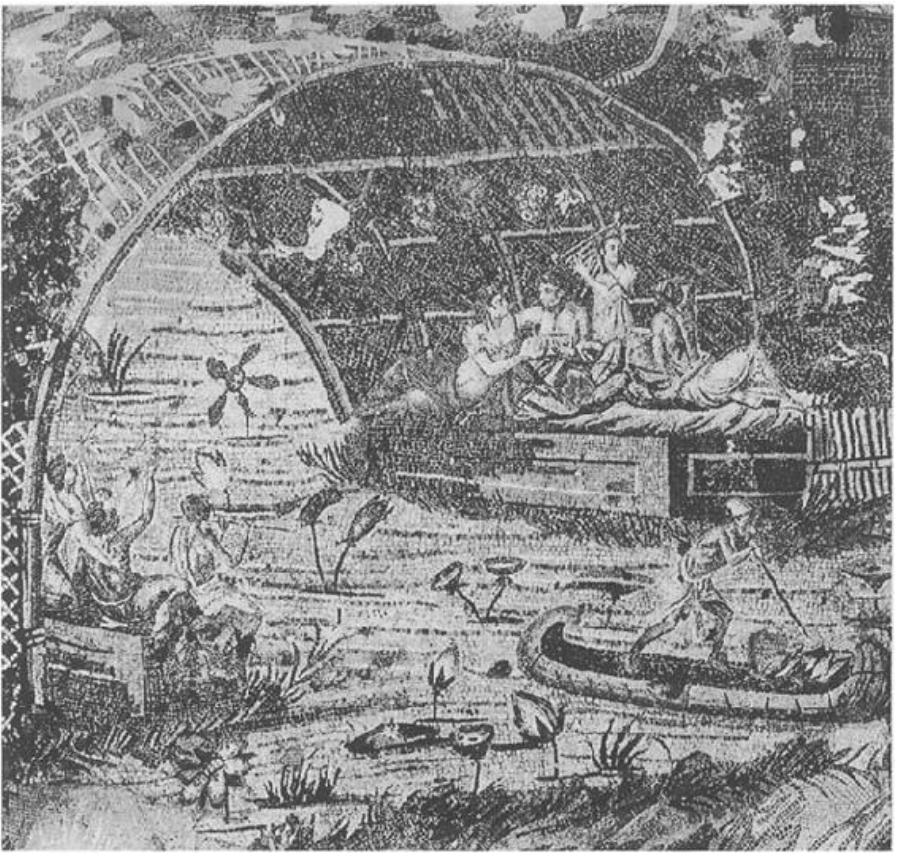


PLATE 12 Revellers at a festival by a canal in the Nile Delta. (From the Nilotic mosaic, Palestrina; Berlin, Pergamon Museum, Inv. Mos. 3)

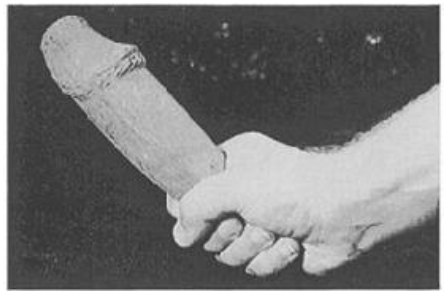
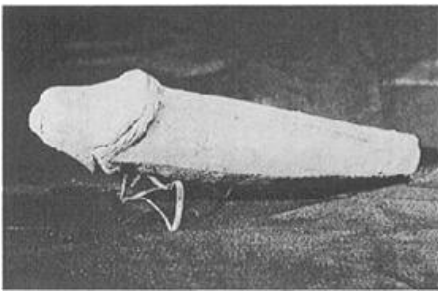


PLATE 13a and 13b Terracotta phallus, tapered to facilitate holding. (Roman period: UC Inv. 38343; reproduced by courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London)

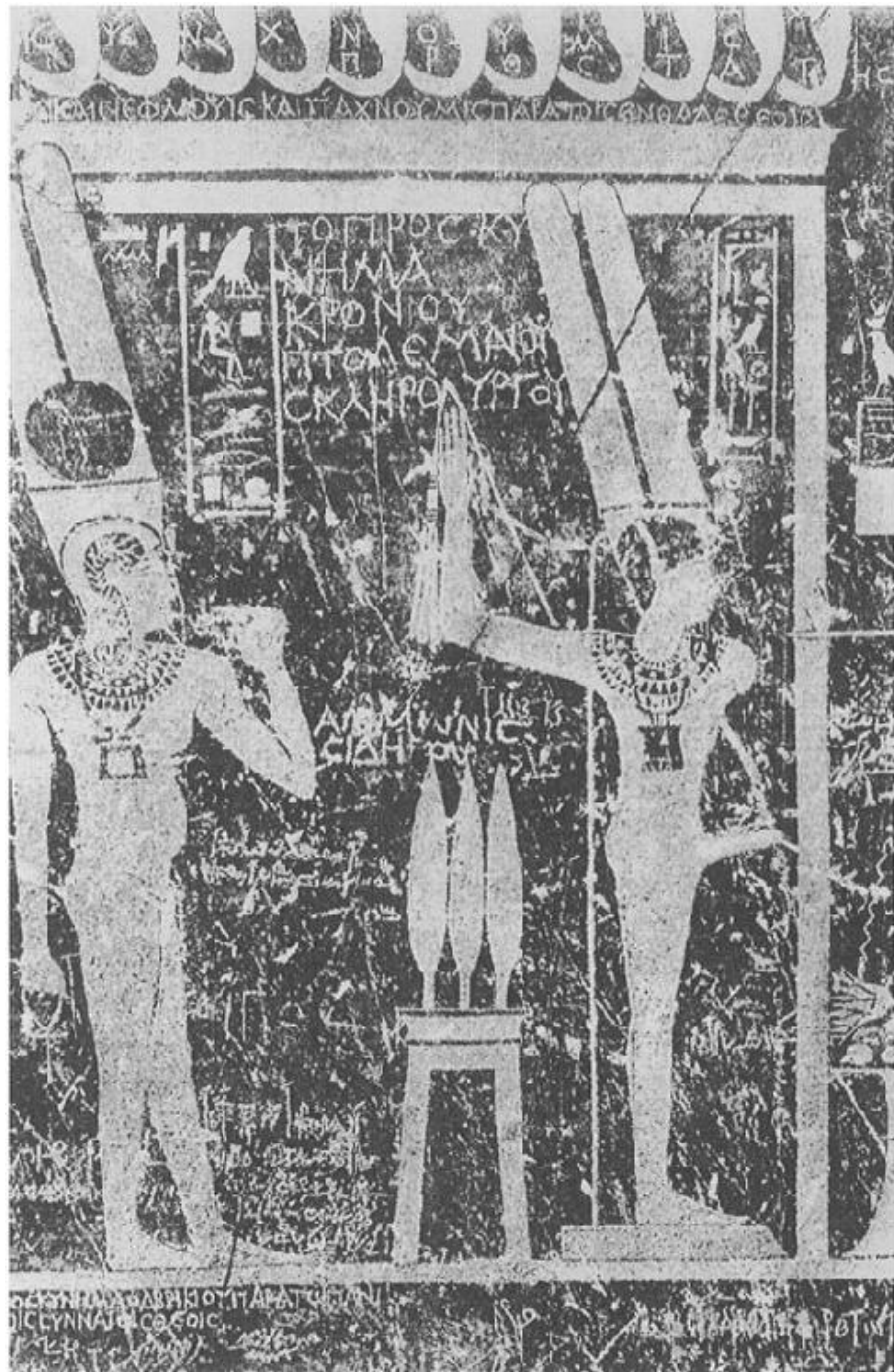


PLATE 14 Roman graffiti surrounding the image of the phallic god Pan/Min at his shrine at el-Kanaïs in the Wadi Hammamat.

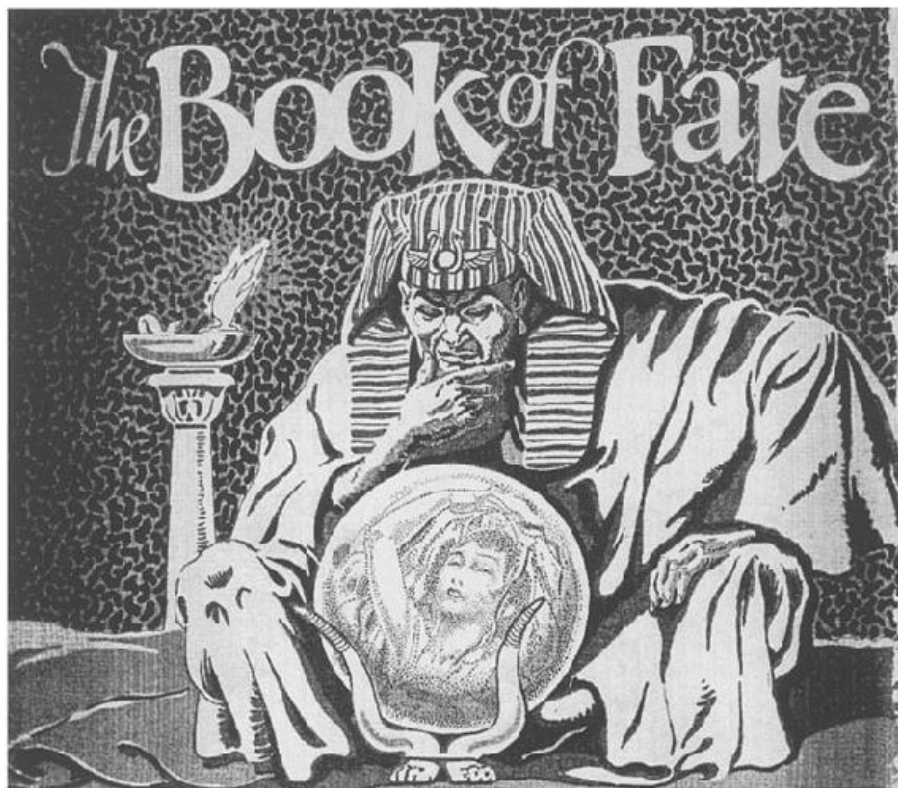


PLATE 15 Dustjacket of 1927 edition of *Napoleon's Book of Fate*, a popular prediction manual supposedly derived from an Egyptian source. (Author's collection)

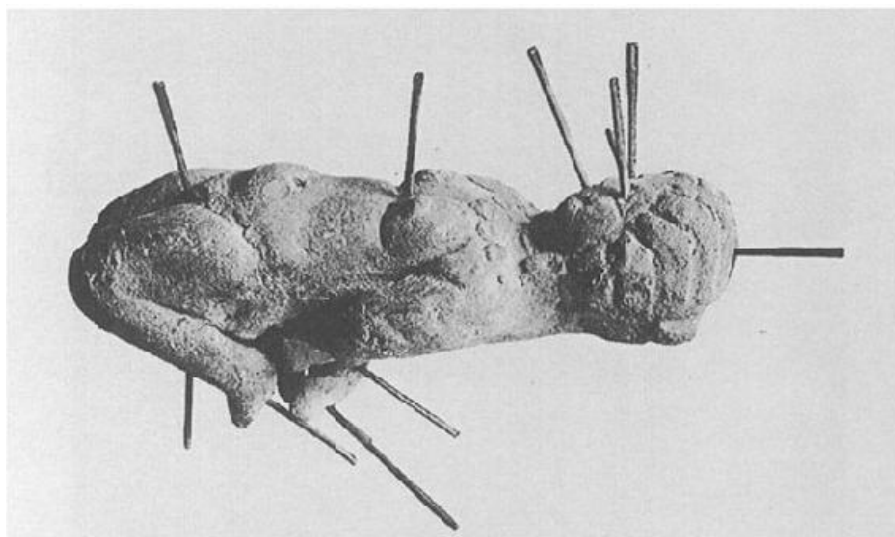


PLATE 16 Terracotta magical figure of Ptolemais, bound and pierced, from Antinoöpolis. (3rd century CE: Louvre, Inv. E 272145)

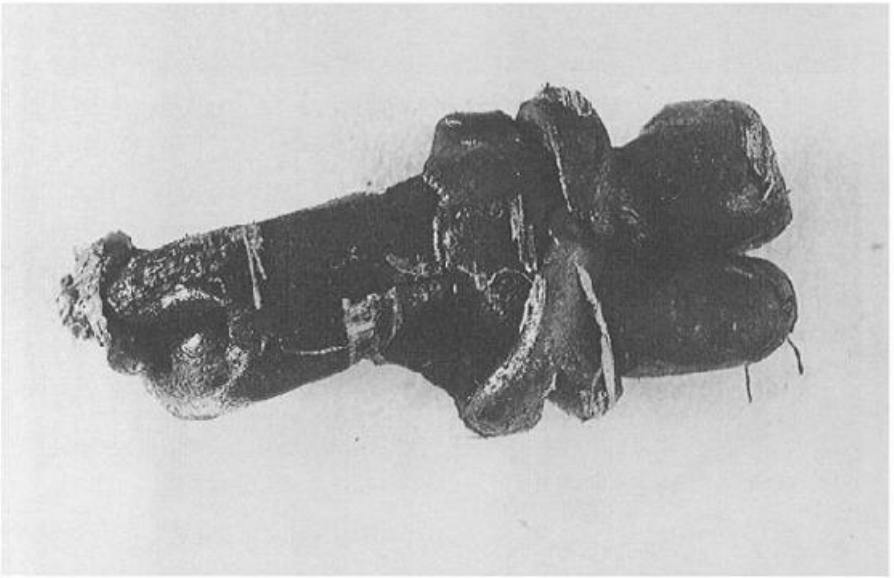


PLATE 17a and 17b Wax figures of a couple making love, bound in a magical papyrus. (3rd century CE: Cologne, Papyrussammlung, P. Colon. Inv. 3323)

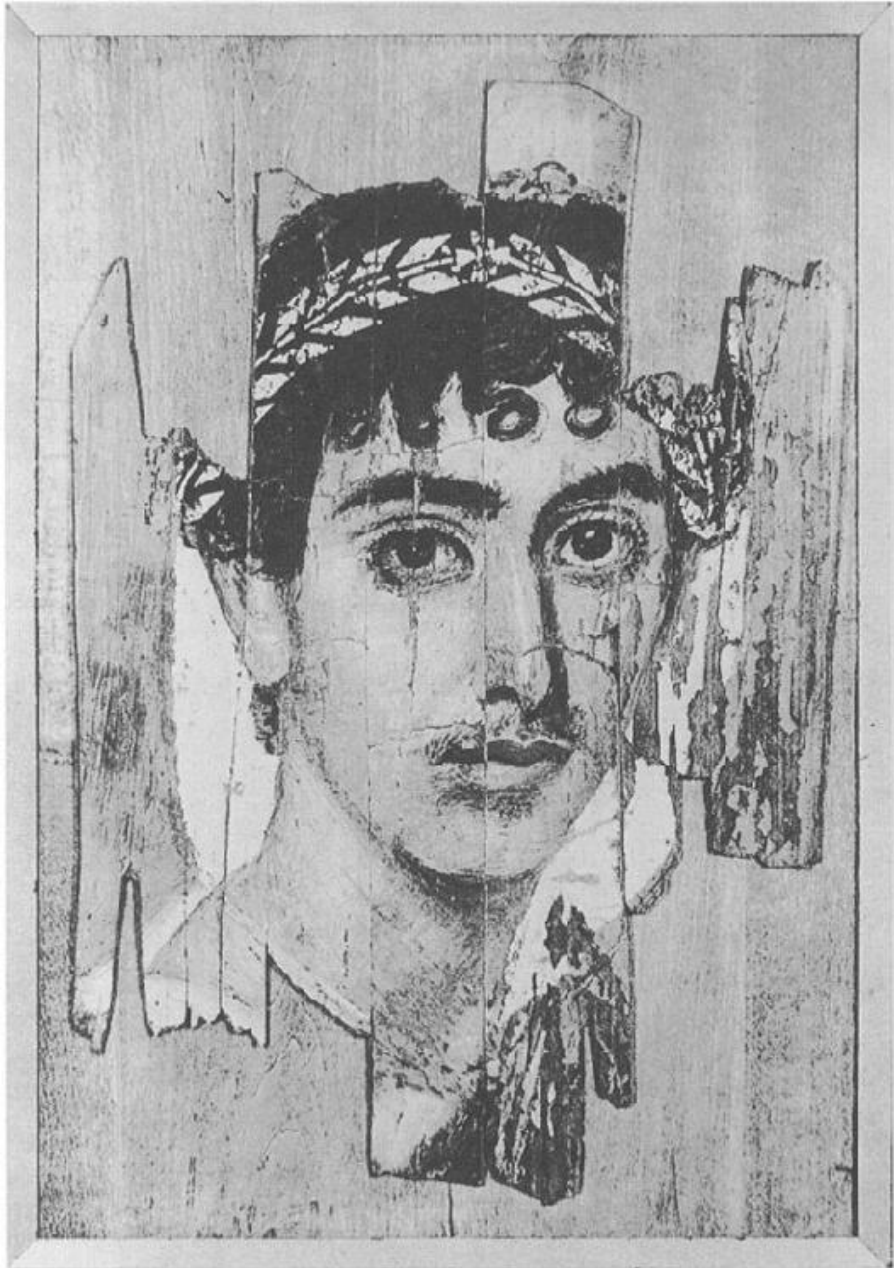


PLATE 18 Portrait of an adolescent boy from Hawara, Fayyum. (2nd century CE:
Pushkin Museum, Moscow, Inv. 6154/1 la 5777)



PLATE 19 Papyrus sketch for a wall painting of a satyr and maenad, perhaps from Hermopolis, drawn on the other side of Plate 1. (Early 3rd century CE: private collection)

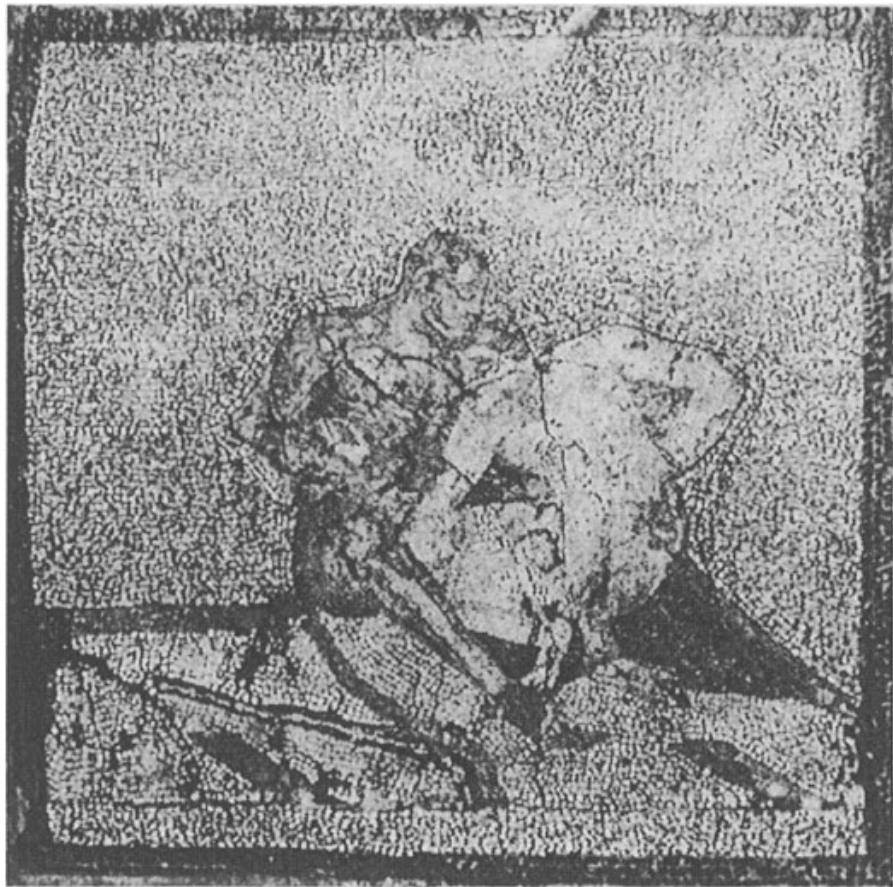


PLATE 20 Mosaic floor showing a satyr and maenad, from Tell Timai in the Delta.
(1st century BCE: Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum)

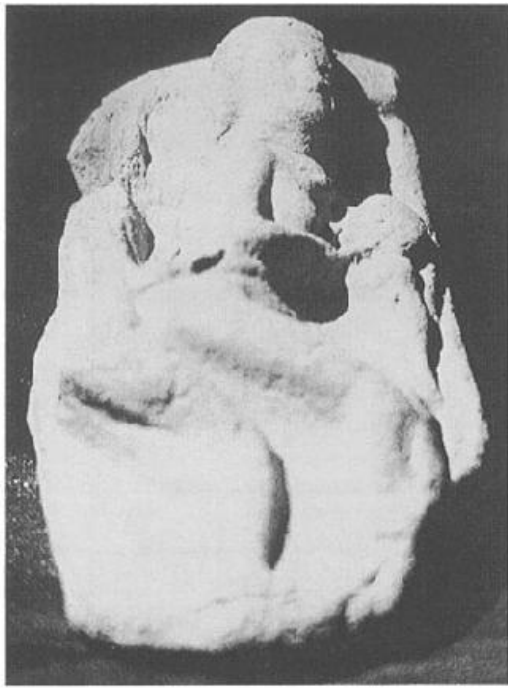


PLATE 21, 22 and 23 Terracotta objects of daily use: a plaque of a couple making love, a winged phallus, figure of a woman for suspension. (Roman period: Inv. UC 35953, UC 38344 and UC 33447; reproduced by courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London)



PLATE 24 Limestone *symplegma* figure of a couple making love, from Memphis. (2nd century BCE: Inv. UC 35954; reproduced by courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London)



PLATE 25 Phallic terracotta lamp in the form of Silenus, from Ehnasya. (Roman period: Inv. 36434; reproduced by courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London)

The best attested types of tattooing from Græco-Roman Egypt are cultic and punitive. The clearest examples of tattooing as a punishment come in two literary texts. One is a fragmentary poem preserved on a Ptolemaic period papyrus,³⁹ in which a person

threatens an enemy with tattooing onto his skin the images of punishments suffered by notorious mythological sinners. Thus Tantalus and his stone will be tattooed on his forehead, and the Calydonian boar sent to punish Oeneus in another obvious place on the body. Although there is obviously an element of poetic hyperbole here, this text's notion of tattooing seems to be backed up by in the fifth dialogue of the Alexandrian comic writer Herodas. Here a tattoo is a punishment inflicted on a slave, Gastron (literally 'little belly') by his cruel female owner Bitinna, who is presented as a vengeful nymphomaniac. She accuses Gastron of being unfaithful to her and orders that he be stripped, tied up, beaten and tattooed on the forehead. Bitinna revels in the painfulness of the process as well as the permanent and visible disgrace it would confer on Gastron, but another woman intercedes for him and Bitinna grudgingly waives the punishment. The forehead as the location for a shameful tattoo also comes up in a documentary text, P. Lille 29 (third century BCE), which stipulates that disobedient or runaway slaves can be punished with 100 lashes and a tattoo on the forehead.

Cultic tattooing is referred to by Herodotus at a sanctuary of a god whom he calls Heracles, in the vicinity of Canopus in the Delta. 'If a runaway slave takes refuge at this shrine and allows the sacred tattoo-marks,⁴⁰ which are the sign of his submission to the service of the god, to be set upon his body, his master cannot lay hands on him, no matter who he may be.'⁴¹ Again there is the association of tattooing with slavish status. In fact, sacred tattoo marks could be a useful means of identifying a fugitive. In 156 BCE a Syrian slave called Hermon escaped in Alexandria with some valuable property. The notice (P. Paris 10) offering a reward for his capture described him as 'about 18 years old, of middle height, beardless, with strong legs ... a mole on the left side of the nose, a scar over the left side of the mouth, tattooed on the right wrist with two foreign letters.' The 'foreign letters' were probably Aramaic symbols of Hermon's consecration to the gods of his native town in Syria. Even when practised on the most exalted social level, religious tattooing came in for criticism. Ptolemy IV Philopator is said to have been tattooed with ivy leaves as a mark of his initiation into the cult of Dionysus. Plutarch disapproves, saying that Ptolemy's tattoo was evidence of his lack of self-discipline and his utter effeminacy. To add to the ignominy of bodily mutilation, he goes on to compare the king to the Galli, the self-castrating eunuch priests of the Phrygian goddess Cybele.⁴²

Tattoos may not have conveyed much of an erotic charge. Signs of other kinds of ineradicable modification, such as piercing, are even less easy to locate. There is no evidence for the infibulation of the male genitals, popularly believed to be an Egyptian custom. The

Egyptian form supposedly consisted of somehow buttoning up the foreskin with metal clips to delay puberty.⁴³ Rather than having much basis in reality, references to male infibulation are probably expressions of Egyptian body customs signifying a world turned upside down. Piercing of other body parts, currently so fashionable, seems to have been restricted to single holes in the ears and was largely gender-specific. It was certainly the norm for women as shown by the frequent representations of wearing elaborate ear-rings in mummy portraits. Ear-rings also appear in lists of dowry goods among other specifically female commodities, such as clothing and other jewellery. It is not known when the piercing took place and whether it was associated with any life-crisis rituals: the rare mummy portraits of pre-pubescent girls are not shown with ear-rings. Similarly, men with pierced ears do not appear on mummy portraits and are not well attested in other sources: like tattoos, ear-rings for men may have been equated with slavishness, foreignness and effeminacy. From Egypt, the best evidence is a series of descriptions in a group of Ptolemaic papyri.⁴⁴ These all originate from the Theban area and date to between 120–100 BCE, so ear-piercing may have been a very localised custom; the men concerned are not obviously of foreign origin. These men always have only one ear pierced, the left being more common than the right, and the information is added as the final element after the familiar string of standard descriptive terms: ‘Horus son of Necothēs, aged about 35, of middle height, honey-coloured, with a bald forehead, broad-headed, straightnosed, with his left ear pierced’ (P. Ryl. IV 581.10–11). Presumably Horus was either wearing an ear-ring, or the hole in his ear was large enough to be visible.

Conclusions

The liberation of the human body from sexual constraints has certainly been one of the most important movements in shaping contemporary culture. However, this widening of physical opportunity has led to a narrowing of bodily sensibility. The physical self and the sexual self are inseparable, as Richard Sennett has pointed out, and the body in society is too often seen through the prism of sexuality.⁴⁵ The range of ways in which people in Græco-Roman Egypt could change their bodies is a salutary reminder of the narrowness of this approach. Their forms of bodily adaptation are intrinsically interesting, but it is more important to think of how these changes of physical status conveyed ideologies: of status and control, of gender and ethnicity, all in apparent confirmation of Lévi-Strauss's idea that ‘at all times and in all places, it has been man who has contrived to transform his body into a product of its own techniques and

representation.’ In other words, the way someone changed his or her body made a qualitative difference to how he or she experienced the world.

- 1 Stela in the British Museum, EA 147, excerpted = Lichtheim (1980) 59–65. The translation of the last sentence is problematic.
- 2 See Hanson (1985) 25–30 for a good summary of the relationship of Egyptian medicine, particularly its pharmacopoeia, to Greek.
- 3 E.g. P. Kahun; about 300 years later is P. Ebers, which has prescriptions to stop the movement of the womb at col. 93.18–20 (case 789), 94.7–8 (case 795).
- 4 E.g. P. Kahun 28; P. Carlsberg VIII 4.
- 5 Dancers, athletes and prostitutes were all in danger of their wombs becoming displaced because of the physiological effects of their professions: see [Chapter 5](#).
- 6 For references and discussion, see Ritner (1984) 209–13.
- 7 Translated from the text in Sauneron (1968) 328.
- 8 See Ritner (1984) 220–1.
- 9 E.g. P. Oxy. I 187.
- 10 See Pack (1965) no. 2347: text in Marganne (1981) 62.
- 11 See Marganne (1981) 168–9.
- 12 For a discussion of the term *physis* to mean genitalia, see Winkler (1990) appendix I; see also Laqueur (1990).
- 13 Sauneron (1968) 328.
- 14 P. Jumilhac: text in Vandier (1961). On Egyptian ideas about the production of sperm, see Heritier-Auge (1989) 171.
- 15 Galen and others repeat the Egyptian idea that semen has its origin in the spine: see Rousselle (1988) 13, and generally 12–15 and 18–20 on ancient medical writings about the dangers of overfrequent intercourse for men.
- 16 See Rousselle (1988) 19–20 for references.
- 17 Stopes (1922) 80.
- 18 Much (1929): translation from Kiefer (1934) 15 7–8.
- 19 For references, see Lindsay (1965) 266–79.
- 20 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblus* IV 4.178–9.
- 21 Pseudo-Cleopatra in Galen XII 403.15–404.10, ed. C. Kuhn (Leipzig 1827, repr. Darmstadt 1965).
- 22 See PDM XIV and nn. 253 and 544.
- 23 Plutarch, *Concerning Isis and Osiris* 80 (= *Moralia* 383d).
- 24 See Clédat (1915) 46.
- 25 See Thesleff (1965).
- 26 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 2.4.
- 27 Winlock (1942) 99.
- 28 For references, see Lindsay (1965) 275 and nn. 26–32.
- 29 See Smith (1992) 163–7.
- 30 The shaving of Isiac priests is discussed by Plutarch, *Concerning Isis and Osiris* 3–4 (= *Moralia* 352b–c).
- 31 For the effeminate connotations of delipatories, see [Chapter 6](#) and Gleason (1990) 399–402.
- 32 For regulations of these clubs, see P. Mich. V 243.
- 33 Still the best account of Egyptian tattooing is that of Keimer (1948).
- 34 Keimer (1948) 45–7.
- 35 There is an excellent discussion of this notion by Jones (1987).
- 36 Sextus Empiricius, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III 202.

- 37 E.g. BGU VI 1258 from Hermopolis, second century CE.
- 38 According to Strouhal (1992) 89, Maspero's excavations at Akhmim in Middle Egypt 'yielded several female mummies of the Græco-Roman period with tattoo marks on the chin and sides of the nose.' I have not been able to locate any further reference to this.
- 39 Full edition by Huys (1991).
- 40 Although stigma here is usually translated as 'brands', Jones (1987) 144 argues convincingly that they are tattoos.
- 41 Herodotus II 113.
- 42 Plutarch, *How to Distinguish between a Flatterer and a Friend* (= *Moralia* 56e).
- 43 See Dingwall (1925) 40, 47, the latter quoting Bulwer (1654) 201; Rousselle (1989) 313–14. This form should not be confused with the Greek form of infibulation, which involved securing the genitals with strings to provide support during athletics.
- 44 E.g. BGU X 1971; P. Adler. 5, 12, 15, 17; P. Ryl. IV 581; PSI IX 1016; P. Strass, II 87. There is also a Demotic text where a man is described as having a pierced ear: see Andrews in Johnson (1992) 24.
- 45 Sennett (1994)

Marriage, Morality and Divorce

In some respects, marriage was the sphere of life where the diverse individual systems and mores that made up the pluralist culture of Graeco-Roman Egypt manifested themselves most clearly. Like the architecture of the great provincial cities, marital practices in Egypt developed by a process of accretion. As one walked through the centre of a big town like Hermopolis or Oxyrhynchus, one would have seen a mixture of religious buildings in traditional Egyptian style rubbing shoulders with the classically designed public buildings that defined the Greek *polis* – the bath complex, the gymnasium and the theatre. But on leaving the centre, one would have moved into what Rostovtzeff, the doyen of the social historians of Egypt, saw as a large and dirty Egyptian village showing comparatively little change from previous eras.¹ Marriage in the Greek and Roman period was just such a *mélange*. Early Greek settlers usually emigrated to Egypt alone, where they often formed relationships with local women. Deprived of the cultural framework provided by their home city, there was a gradual tendency for settlers to conform to local customs. As time went on, Greek forms of marriage began to be increasingly influenced by Egyptian ones.

An analysis of the practices surrounding marriage is central to any discussion of sexual life. For many, if not most people, marriage would have been the main arena for sexual experience. The individual and private process of marriage also formalises larger ideas and constructs prevalent in a given society: ideas about gender relationships or about the purpose of partners' sexual intercourse, for instance. So to look at the institution of marriage in the broadest sense, from its social demography, to the ritualisation of the wedding and what happened when everything went wrong, can give some idea of how-it-was-for-them. Again, the papyri are uniquely informative sources. Marriage contracts on papyrus stipulate the moral duties of partners and how they were expected to conduct themselves sexually. Divorce documents and petitions against spouses who misbehave imply the kind of behaviour that was thought appropriate for married people in Græco-Roman Egypt. Census returns from the Roman period, which list the people residing in an individual house, suggest how married

couples and families inhabited domestic space. With more sophisticated archaeology, in the future it may even be possible to locate families known from census returns in their actual dwellings.

These Roman period census returns have recently been the subject of a major study by Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier.² Their work demonstrates how much useful information about the marital experience in its widest construction can be extracted from these unpromising documents. Using methods of demographic and statistical analysis, they come to some important conclusions about several areas of marriage practices, which I propose to develop here by trying to think a little beyond the texts. Bagnall and Frier are, I think, well aware of the human potential of their graphs and kinship charts. They prefaced their book with a brief quotation from Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, which concludes, 'I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women, / And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.' That is what I want to try to do here: to project the demographic (and other) data onto people's lives to consider the sexual actuality of being a married person in Græco-Roman Egypt.

Nearly everybody in Roman Egypt was married at some time in their lives.³ Early marriage was the means of optimising the fertility of women in a society with a high infant mortality rate. High female fertility was required if the population was to replicate itself, and women might be expected to have large families. But there was also the problem that a significant proportion of fertile women would die in childbirth. Accordingly, it was necessary to distribute the burden of pregnancy as widely as possible among all the available fertile women. As a consequence, permanent female celibacy is almost unheard of, and practically all women marry, most of them when fairly young. Girls in Egypt could expect to be married not long after menarche, often by the time they were about 17, and certainly by their mid-20s. For women marriage was almost indistinguishable from physical maturation. Early marriage also had the advantage of increasing the likelihood that the bride was still a virgin, an obvious concern in societies where provable paternity is important. Women were expected to be virgins when they first married, and this is sometimes explicitly stated in marriage contracts. In the early second century CE, a woman called Zenarion married a Roman citizen, M. Petronius Servillius. The opening sentence in their contract (P. Mich VII 434) clearly states that the marriage is for the creation of legitimate children and that Zenarion's virginity is an integral part of this. Her father says that he 'has placed in matrimony his own daughter, a virgin, Zenarion, his heiress, in accordance with the Julian law concerning marriage which was passed for the purpose of

procreating children.’⁴

A woman would marry in her teens: most men, however, would be somewhat older than their wives. The median male age at first marriage was probably at least 25. Therefore girls marrying for the first time might expect to have husbands anything from five to ten years older than them, but it was quite possible for the age differential to be two or three decades, particularly in the case of male subsequent marriages. A representative example is the family of Pantbeus, who lived at the village of Thelbonthon Siphtha in lower Egypt in 173 CE. Pantbeus was aged 49, his wife Theros was 21. Her first surviving child was born when she was 16, and she had two younger daughters, aged 4 and 2. Pantbeus also had a son aged 10 from his previous wife, who was either divorced or more probably dead.⁵ The couple lived in a large extended household of 17 people, including Pantbeus’ three brothers and their wives and children. Pantbeus’ youngest brother Haronnesis was the same age as Theros, so their mother must have had a reproductive life of at least 28 years, presumably giving birth to Haronnesis when well into her 40s. If the lives of Pantbeus and Theros’ family are not atypical, a girl in Roman Egypt might expect to have her first sexual experience not long after menarche with a husband who was older – possible considerably older. If Theros survived serial births, she could then expect to spend an appreciable part of the next quarter-century or so pregnant.

What unmarried men did for sex between puberty and their first marriage can only be guessed at. The whole question hinges on how much access people had to each other, which is not easy to reconstruct. If access was restricted, sexual opportunities for unmarried males would have been dependent on their socioeconomic status and whereabouts they lived in Egypt. Young men from wealthy urban families could certainly have used slaves and/or prostitutes for sex. If they belonged to the élite male institutions in Alexandria or the Greek cities, they may have had access to relationships with other men. Privileged men, therefore, might be expected to go into their wedding chamber with some sexual experience, possibly quite varied, though it is unlikely that much of it would have been with women of equivalent social status. As for the poorer classes, it seems likely that many village males in their teens and twenties drifted off to the cities, where the chances for casual sex would have been greater than in their own communities. If they could afford to pay prostitutes, they might have sex with them, especially at festival times. For unmarried men left in village environments, possibilities were more limited. Perhaps as in modern Egypt where demographic patterns are not dissimilar, they had sex with each other or with the farm-animals.⁶ Rape and forced sexual intercourse must have gone on (they are

frequent activities of sex-starved monks in Christian literature from Egypt⁷), but they have left very little impact on the documentary papyri.

Consensual relationships with women on their own might be a possibility. There is very little evidence for these. A text (BGU IV 1024), to which I shall return, presents a single woman, not a prostitute, with two lovers perhaps living in Alexandria.⁸ One of these men is apparently a regular partner, the other an infidelity, or at least not known to the other man. The woman is talked about as the former's *philê*, 'beloved' or possibly even 'girlfriend.' She must be unmarried, because her lovers are not called adulterers (*moichoi*) and no husband is on the scene. In fact, this woman ends up being murdered by her regular lover, who is said 'to love her too much'. He catches her with the other man and stabs her. This is not to say, of course, that her lover was not married, and that she was the concubine of a man who had left or deserted his wife, hence the appellation *philê*. One cannot argue for generalities on the basis of one text, but the unmarried woman with a regular lover may have been a recognisable figure, at least in the urban environment.

Things may have been different outside big towns. The census returns suggest generally that women who were divorced or widowed young would have some difficulty finding permanent partners, but their sexual availability is difficult to ascertain. Some widows or divorcées lived alone with children or slaves, and might be presumed to have some sexual autonomy because they controlled the household. One such woman was Nemesilla, who in 187 CE made a declaration of her household in the nome-capital Arsinoë. She is either widowed or divorced, and aged 39; she lives with her two young children, an undetermined number of male lodger(s) and several slaves.⁹ Other lone women went to live with relatives, where their sexual lives may have been more restricted. Perhaps the best argument against the sexual availability of women without permanent male partners, especially given the unreliability of ancient contraceptives, is that few of them appear to have had illegitimate children. But the children might have been exposed, or the partners might have engaged in non-reproductive sex –the possibilities are endless and it is ultimately fruitless to speculate. All the evidence suggests that the sexual opportunities for non-élite men before marriage, especially in rural communities, were not particularly extensive.

La Fouterie Est La Lyrisme Du Peuple?

As Baudelaire's aphorism suggests ('Screwing is the people's poetry'), marriage has been seen as enabling couples to explore the limits of

their sensuality. All this raises the difficult question of how far marriage was a forum for eroticism in Græco-Roman Egypt. Georges Bataille, an original if perverse mind, elaborated this: 'marriage', he wrote, 'is often thought of as having little to do with eroticism... it must be stressed that although this aspect has nothing to do with marriage it has in fact always been present in it. Marriage in the first place is the framework of legitimate sensuality.'¹⁰ The extent to which such ideas are applicable to people in Græco-Roman Egypt is not easy to establish. Marriage was intrinsically associated with procreation in people's minds, and a fecund married woman in good health might produce nine children over her reproductive life, perhaps one every three years.¹¹ Sex was also thought of as a prophylactic for women, helping their bodies to function properly. A fertile woman would therefore spend a considerable portion of her married life either pregnant or recovering from the birth of children. But was there good sport to be had at their making? On first marriage at least, it seems likely that the typical non-élite partners might be relatively unsophisticated sexually. The brides would probably be young virgins: the grooms, even if older than their wives, were unlikely to have had much more experience with women than casual sex with prostitutes. What would be the psychological effects of such an introduction to sex? Aline Rousselle believes that the early sexual initiation of Roman women led to them feeling a revulsion for sex; but she argues for earlier defloration in the western empire than is attested for Egypt, at about age 12.¹² Other factors, like cramped living conditions, might have limited the extent to which such couples felt able to experiment sexually with each other. Not much is known about domestic sleeping patterns in village houses, or even if married couples were expected always to sleep together, but it is probable that the internal space of the house was comparatively undifferentiated. People would have bedded down where appropriate, and bedrooms may not have been fixed as such. In hot weather people probably slept outside or on the roof, as they do now in rural Egypt. In these domestic arrangements, sex would have been a public act. 'The very magical privacy of the bed . . . may itself only be bought with money, and lack of privacy limits sexual sophistication, which may not be pursued in a room full of children.'¹³ To return to Theros and Pantbeus, for example: it is not known what size or kind of accommodation they had at the village of Thelbonthon Siphtha, but their close proximity to 15 other people may be thought to have some effect on how they conducted themselves in bed.

Alternatively, it is possible that married couples in pagan Egypt did not feel sexually restricted by living in such intimacy with family members. Being ashamed of sex is a characteristically bourgeois

Christian notion. The perceived dreadfulness of the poor being forced to have sex in the presence of their children and extended household has been a trope of social *exposé* literature from Engels and Mayhew onwards. Historical parallels from early modern societies where communal sleeping is common do not suggest that lovers were sexually inhibited by the presence of others in the same space. If privacy did concern the Egyptians, couples may have snatched opportunities for sex outdoors, or in the house at times of the day when other people were unlikely to be about.¹⁴

When considering the realities of sex, it is also important to remember the age discrepancy between husbands and wives. Women married to men even a few years their senior might anticipate being left widows within a decade or so. Even if their husbands survived, one wonders how the sexual lives of Theros and other youthful women married to much older men developed as their husbands grew older. The aged cuckold and his lusty young wife were standard characters in ancient writing.

One could argue, then, that marriage as an arena for sophisticated sexual experimentation is only possible in modern western cultures, which provide the basic circumstances necessary to foster it: sex liberated from procreation, the private division of social space, increased adult life expectancy. However, there was certainly an awareness of recreational sex in Græco-Roman Egypt. Sex and procreation did not always go hand-in-hand. Medico-magical recipes for contraceptives exist (several are translated in [Chapter 8](#)), but these strange amulets or decoctions of honey and crocodile dung are not likely to have been very effective. The practice of extended breast-feeding, at least among the less well-off, might also have inhibited fertility in married women. However, the census returns show that women continued to produce children regularly until well into their 40s, so they and their husbands were not using (or did not have access to) successful birth control. Contraception within marriage might also have been considered problematic, because it enables women to be promiscuous unless knowledge of it is kept in the hands of men. There is the possibility that people practised various methods of non-reproductive sex. Again the magical papyri are informative on these: people express their hopes of being able to enjoy fellation, anal, vaginal and intercrural sex, or ‘anything for pleasure’. The sexual armamentum was evidently well stocked and primed to fire. However, there is a problem with using the magical texts as evidence for sexual life within marriage. Magic spells are prescriptions for bringing about new states of affairs: the love-objects in them are unattainable, hence the recourse to magic. So presumably the people (usually women) who are being enchanted for sexual purposes are not wives, or at least

not the wives of the enchanters.¹⁵

What quality of emotional relationship could people look forward to when they married? Like the construction of sexuality, the nature of marital relationships in the Roman world has been an intellectual hot potato over the last decade or so. The debate has tended to polarise, with some scholars proposing a rather gloomy view that people's expectations of fulfilling emotional relationships were low, while others are much more optimistic.¹⁶ An important focus of the controversy has been the so-called 'new conjugality' discernible in marital relationships, propounded most importantly by Veyne and Foucault.¹⁷ In literature of the early imperial period, they argued, there was a perceptible shift in the debate on sexual relationships. Writings of the classical period discuss and theorise relations between men and boys most frequently, while in the Roman empire the relationships between men and their wives appear to be much more important. The ethical innovation is that there should be a reciprocity in moral conduct: that the male partner should restrain his own sexual desire as much as the female has been expected to, and therefore that sex between a married couple is a shared expression of marital happiness. This is, in effect, a critique of the inequality implicit in the relationships between adult males and young boys.

Clearly this debate takes place on a rarefied scholarly and intellectual level, and is concerned with the Roman senatorial élite rather than ordinary people in the Greek-speaking east of the empire. Thus it may not have had much direct influence on ordinary people in Græco-Roman Egypt, but there is the possibility of some filtering down effect. Elements of 'conjugality' may be read in some Egyptian sources of the Roman period, which are difficult to ascribe to any indigenous tradition. Demotic advice manuals of the period preach that a wife should be sexually submissive and give in to whatever her husband demands. 'A woman should let herself be loved according to the fashion of her husband . . . may the wish of the wife be the wish of her husband, so that they may be free of strife.'¹⁸ But later literary pictures of ideal marriages from Egypt are pervaded with images of gentle harmony and emotional equilibrium leading to mutual sexual satisfaction and the birth of children (see the epithalamies translated below). One might expect to find evidence for the filtering down of a new élite morality in the moral stipulations of marriage contracts. These certainly respond to changing ideologies, with sexual provisions becoming much more draconian with Christianity, when 'subservience had replaced reciprocity'.¹⁹ In the earliest dated Greek document from Egypt, a marriage contract of 311 BCE,²⁰ Demetria promised her husband Heracleides not to do anything to shame him, while Heracleides undertakes not to bring other women home: a typically

Greek notion of sexual responsibilities within marriage. Ptolemaic and early Roman contracts have double standards built into them, such as that of Thermion and Apollonius, drawn up in Alexandria in 13 BCE (BGU IV 1052). Thermion promised to ‘fulfil her duties towards her husband and their shared life and not to absent herself from the house for a night or day without the consent of Apollonius . . . nor dishonour nor injure their common home nor have sex with another man.’ Apollonius, on the other hand, only agreed to provide Thermion with suitable material goods as far as he can afford them, and not to throw her out without reasonable cause, treat her violently or bring home another woman. For him, adultery with women or boys outside the marital residence was quite permissible (also, presumably, a realisable option) and certainly not a ground for divorce. Sexual continence was not an issue for Apollonius and other men, and this clause continues to be written into contracts well into the Roman period. However, when Tausiris and Arsinous married at Oxyrhynchus in 260 CE, they promised to ‘live together blamelessly, safeguarding the obligations of marriage’ (*symbiouein allêllois amemptôs phyllasontes ta tou gamou dikaiā*).²¹ *Prima facie*, there is a shift of emphasis here. Yet identical provisions also occur in early imperial marriage contracts, before the notion of reciprocity was extensively theorised.²² By the same token, phrases from much earlier marriage contracts was resuscitated in the Byzantine period, implying a continuum of usage not represented in surviving documents. Cause and effect are going to be difficult to gauge.

Marriage contracts are composed of legal formulae, but their moral provisions vary. To an extent, they would have been modified by what the individuals concerned would or would not have been willing to agree to. It might be unrealistic to expect to find expressions of affection elsewhere in the papyrological record: happy families have no documentary history. For evidence of working affectional relationships, a potential source might be letters between husbands and wives rather than formal texts defining an ideology of marriage. Again, letters record unusual situations, when couples are separated, and may not be composed in circumstances that enabled the senders to really give vent to their full feelings. Husbands and wives certainly write to each other in caring terms: they worry when they are parted from each other and pray that their health will be preserved. Some letters certainly articulate a very real mutual affection between the spouses. Aline, wife of Apollonius, writes to her husband when he was absent fighting the Jewish rebels in 115–117 CE (P. Giess. 19):

I am terribly anxious about you because of what they say is happening and because of your sudden departure. I take no

pleasure in food or drink but stay awake continually night and day with one concern, your well-being ... I beg you to take care of yourself and not expose yourself to danger without a guard.

Troilus writes to his wife at Oxyrhynchus: 'Troilus to his sister Mazatis, very many greetings. Above all I pray that you are flourishing and the little boy too, bless him' (P. Fuad I Univ. 6). The standard wish in letters, 'I make an obeisance for you every day in front of god X,' is not an epistolary cliché but a real concern about the well-being of a loved one in a dangerous environment that the absent partner is unable to monitor. Unusually fulsome is the opening of this fragmentary letter (P. Oxy. XLII 3059) from Didyme to her 'brother' Apollonius:

Didyme to Apollonius her brother and sun, greetings. You must know that I do not see the sun because you are out of my sight; for I have no other sun but you.

Incestuous Marriages

The last three letters quoted above were all exchanged between spouses calling one another 'brother' and 'sister'. Early scholars refused to believe that this was anything more than a general expression of affection, but gradually it became clear that marriage between full siblings was a regular practice in Roman Egypt. Partners state unambiguously that they are married to their full brother or sister, born from the same mother and the same father. No social stigma attached to the practice. Brother-sister marriages, sometimes over successive generations, took place among élite urban groups and village populations alike. It was widespread throughout Egypt and certainly constituted a real marriage rather than a bureaucratic formality. The phenomenon of brother-sister or consanguineous marriage in Roman Egypt has long been a battleground among social historians and anthropologists.²³ The main difficulty scholars have with the practice is that it is seen to violate an assumed universal of human behaviour: the taboo on incest. This taboo is one of the basic premises of much anthropological theorisation of marriage and social structures, and has been used to construct all kinds of absolutes. The great anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, for instance, says that the prohibition of incest, and the complementary rule of exogamy, is 'the primary step thanks to which, through which and especially in which, the transition from nature to culture is made.'²⁴

Various explanations have been suggested for the relaxation of the

incest taboo in Roman Egypt, none entirely satisfactory. Most of them are based on economic arguments. There is the theory that it was motivated by a desire not to spend money on dowries, or by the necessity of keeping the family property intact in a country with scarce land resources. Others, mistakenly, have seen brother-sister marriage as a continuum of a long-standing Egyptian custom. Most recently, Brent Shaw has argued for a more culturally specific approach to the question.²⁵ Consanguineous marriages in Roman Egypt, he argues, are not to be regarded in terms of a violation of universals, but should be given a culturally specific treatment. They are to be seen as products of a very particular combination of social and political circumstances. He eventually concludes that brother-sister marriages may have been a way of people locating and defining themselves ethnically and socially in a society where such distinctions are very important. 'A succession of very close-kin marriages would, no doubt, be a very helpful strategy in maintaining these critical ethnic-political distinctions.'²⁶ Shaw's arguments are convincing. Marriage was an essential part of the reproductive process of the family and the city, and crucial in a society where the past is a major source of identity. The symbolics of ancestry are very important within this. Egypt was what anthropologists call a bilateral society, where there is a communal valuing of the past, as opposed to systems which look forward to the future. This emphasis can be seen in naming practices, where children (particularly males) are named after ancestors, thus harking back to the past. Within this, brother-sister marriages enabled different groups to conserve identities by endogamy. Whether or not Shaw's explanation is right, he is certainly right to advocate that the consanguineous union was a response to a particular environment.

What is even more interesting is to speculate about the emotional effect of having a sexual relationship with a full sibling. The private letters exchanged between sibling partners certainly suggest that some of these marriages were affectionate and loving. There is, however, the difficulty of interpreting the phraseology of letters. How far can one take the terms 'brother' and 'sister' literally? The census returns are, of course, inexplicit about the emotional aspects of such relationships, but can still be informative. Convenience may well have been an important factor in choosing to marry within the family. Bagnall and Frier point out that if incestuous marriages are permissible, 'early marriage is facilitated for both sexes: choice is widened, and the need for personal initiative in finding a spouse is reduced; marriage is thus earlier for both sexes.'²⁷ In other words, brother-sister unions enabled young people to function as sexual and procreative entities earlier than might otherwise be possible,

particularly males who might find it difficult to marry young. In a society placing a strong emphasis on reproduction, these factors have obvious advantages.

The fact that the spouses had probably grown up together did not necessarily mean that these marriages were any more harmonious than exogamous ones. There is even some evidence from the census returns for close-kin marriages being more likely to end in divorce than exogamous ones.²⁸ The close kinship bond presented an obvious problem if anything went wrong with the marriage – where would the former partners live? Often they seem to have stayed living under the same roof. At Arsinoë in 159 CE, Herodes and his younger sister Zoïdous, themselves the offspring of a brother–sister marriage, still lived together although they were divorced.²⁹ And elsewhere in the same city, a man whose name is lost continued to live with his divorced sister-wife and their two small children, while his second wife and their two daughters lived in the same house too. As Bagnall succinctly comments, ‘the emotional intricacy of this household can only be imagined.’³⁰

Partner Choice and Weddings

The Greek romances of Achilles Tatius and other novelists read in Egypt paint affecting portraits of loving courtships between young people of the same age who have fallen in love and resolved to marry. Their passage to the bridal bed is interrupted by sensational events, including a sojourn in Egypt, but love always triumphs in the end. The young couple sometimes make touching promises to each other. Towards the end of their adventures, Achilles Tatius’ heroes Cleitophon and Leucippe, plight their troths in a little private ceremony at the temple of Isis in Alexandria, followed by a banquet.

On the next day we arranged to meet at the Iseum to speak further and exchange vows with the goddess as our witness. Menelaus and Clinias accompanied us. I pledged to cherish her without guile: she pledged to name me her husband and master of all her property. ‘Our arrival at Ephesus,’ [says Cleitophon] ‘will inaugurate the marriage contract.’ A rich dinner was then served, a wedding supper in name only, the consummation being saved up for a future occasion.³¹

Apart from being interesting fodder in the new conjugality debate, these literary courtships between coevals probably have little basis in fact. Mutual sexual attraction probably played a relatively minor role in partner choice. In Egypt, most first marriages were probably

arranged, as the preponderance of very young women marrying older men suggests. There is no evidence for match-makers. Marriages may have been engineered by parents or senior relatives, though one must remember that even young people marrying for the first time were quite likely to have no parents living. It is not known how much personal choice prospective brides and grooms were able to exercise. Presumably this would have depended on their strength of personality and their feelings (if any) towards the other person. Quite possibly some village women would have scarcely known their first husbands before marriage, especially if the men had been away working in cities for some time. Subsequent unions were a different proposition, where people probably wielded more individual control over whom they would marry.

Once the partner had been chosen, the marriage itself could begin relatively informally. The most important element of marriage was the acknowledged cohabitation of the couple, which did not have to be validated by a written contract or a ceremony. Egyptian marriages were usually virilocal, the wife living with her husband's family. The transport of the bride to her husband's home may well have been marked by some celebration like a torchlit procession, common elsewhere in the Greek world. If so, it has left no mark on the Egyptian documents. In this way, men and women could come together in an 'unwritten union' (*agraphos gamos*) without bureaucratic intervention. A contract could be drawn up at any time if there were some reason to do so, such as to sort out financial questions, but there was no obligation to formalise things. Some contracts were written after the couple had been living together for some time and had several children. There was more likelihood of matters being structured among élite groups, for whom marriage might have greater political and economic significance. The marriage contract itself was an important prop in the process – a large-format, ceremonial document, sometimes in calligraphic script, which would have been read out loud. The following papyrus (P. Giess. 2) is a representative example, written out when Olympias married Antaeus at Crocodilopolis in 173 BCE. Both partners are from the well-to-do landowning classes and are of Greek origin, though probably born in Egypt.

Olympias daughter of Dionysus . . . has given herself in marriage to Antaeus ... so as to be his wedded wife, bringing as dowry reckoned in bronze 95 talents and her slave-girl by the name of Stolis and the nursing child (of Stolis) naked X, plus five copper talents, making a total of 100 copper talents. And let Olympias be beside Antaeus, in obedience to him as is

fitting for a wife to her husband, managing jointly with him their property; and let Antaeus furnish Olympias with the necessities of life and furniture and clothing and everything else that is appropriate for a married woman, both when he is home and when he is away, in accordance with his means; and let it not be allowed for him to introduce another woman into Olympias' presence or have a concubine or a boy lover (*paidikon*), nor let it be allowed for him to beget children from another woman in Olympias' lifetime, nor to inhabit another house of which Olympias shall not be mistress, nor to cast her out or insult her or injure her, or alienate any property to Olympias' detriment. If he should be proved to do any of these things or not to supply her with furniture or clothing or the rest as written above, let Antaeus immediately pay back to her the dowry and a 50 per cent fine, and by the same token, let it not be allowed for Olympias to be absent by night or day from Antaeus' house without his permission.

Six men witnessed the contract, which shows an interesting fusion of conservative Greek and indigenous Egyptian elements. The inequality of the behavioural standards is typically Greek, and articulates concepts of shame and honour that are the natural consequence of theories about male and female physiology. Yet Olympias gives herself over on marriage instead of being handed over by a legal guardian. Unlike Greek women, Egyptian women had the right to act on their own behalf in marriage agreements. So the contract of Olympias and Antaeus may represent a transitional stage in the development of marriage institutions in Egypt.

Among the privileged, preparations for the wedding ceremony could be very elaborate. Oral invitations were given some time in advance, backed up by a short written reminder nearer the day, like this third-century invitation to a consanguineous marriage (P. Oxy. I 111): 'Heraïs requests your company at dinner to celebrate the marriage of her children, at her house, tomorrow the 5 th, at the ninth hour' (Plate 6). The anonymity of Heraïs' invitation suggests that large numbers of guests were expected at the wedding; the invitations were mass – produced by a scribe copying out a whole stack of them, and there was no time for personalisation. Most invitations are to the weddings of female relatives, whether sisters or daughters, indicating both who paid for the celebrations and that the woman was the main focus of the day. The venue for the wedding banquet might have religious overtones: it could be held in a hired temple room, such as the birth-house.³² This was a small peripteral shrine within the enclosure walls of major state temples, where the mystic birth of Horus was celebrated

(see [Figure 6](#)). Apart from being an impressive physical location, holding a wedding banquet here perhaps had an added implication that the bride would share in the fecundity of the goddess.

Putting on a good show to impress friends and acquaintances was obviously important. Money was saved up to buy expensive perfumes and draperies.³³ In the second century CE, an obviously rich and well-connected couple wrote this genial letter (P. Oxy XLVI 3313) to a friend at Oxyrhynchus:

Apollonius and Sarapias to Dionysia, greetings. You filled us with joy by announcing the good news of the wedding of the excellent Sarapion and we would have come immediately to be around him on a day greatly longed for by us, to share his joy, but because of the circuit sessions and the fact that we are also recovering from illness, we could not come.

There are not many roses yet; on the contrary they are in short supply, and from all the estates and garland-weavers we could hardly scrape together the thousand that we sent you via Sarapas, even by picking the ones that ought to have been picked tomorrow. We had as much narcissus as you wanted, so instead of the 2000 you requested we sent 4000 . . . we regard the young people as our own children and esteem and love them more than our own.

Apollonius and Sarapias' letter evokes vividly what a spring wedding among the urban élite must have been like. It is not hard to imagine the newly-married couple enjoying all the attention and being among the sensuous panoply of scented garlands. The wedding banquet was also the time to perform an epithalamium, or specially composed wedding song in praise of the couple. Several have survived on papyrus. This example (Sel. Pap. III 139), probably from the late third century CE, gives a conventional picture of the perfect marriage. It is a pretty miserable piece, cobbled together from stock epithalamic phrases:

Oh groom, the sweet Graces and Glory are thy
attendants,
And gracious Harmony has granted thee nuptial honour.
Dear bride, great abiding joy be thine; worthy's the
Husband thou'st found, yea worthy. May Heaven grant
thee
Concord, and the gods grant thee children; and may they
too
Get children, and a ripe old age be ready for thee.

Later on, in the sixth century, the lawyer-poet Dioscoursus of Aphroditopolis celebrated the wedding of two members of the local gentry, Callinicus and Theophile. Egypt was by now Christian, of course, but the new ideology has left little mark on Dioscoursus' hack wedding verse. His wishes for Callinicus and Theophile to have a harmonious life together and produce children who resemble their parents are entirely in accord with earlier sentiments:

O Bridegroom, my your nuptials graced be,
By charming dances of the sister three.
The bride you carry to your nuptial bed
Is shod in silver, and in gold crowned:
A living Ariadne we acclaim,
Though Theophile is her mortal name.
May Love's sweet scent suffuse your married life,
And let good judgement take the place of strife.
As gold gold matches, and silver silver finds,
You'll raise new tendrils of the honey'd vine.
Bacchus attends your summer wedding day
With plenteous wine, that sweetens lovers' play,
And blonde Demeter rosy garlands weaves
To deck your wedding-chamber's scented eaves.
Like a Menelaus of a tawnier hue
Follow your Helen, who will be ever true,
And soon you'll hold your children in your arms,
The image of the happy couple's charms.³⁴

Epithalamia like these make clear the ideal expectations of marriage among the élite. Affectionate companionship was the goal, leading to a harmonious and mutually enjoyable sexual union which would result in the birth of healthy children who resemble them.

To die unmarried, never having known the pleasure of love, was to die incomplete. This is a regular theme in Egyptian grave inscriptions commemorating young people who died before marriage. In these texts, all the trappings of the wedding ceremony become grotesquely inverted: the torches that should have lit the way to the bridal chamber instead light the funeral procession, the nuptial bed itself becomes a funeral couch. For women, death is a defloration. Isidora, an unmarried girl from Hermopolis, was drowned in the Nile sometime in the second century CE. According to Egyptian beliefs about the sanctity of the river, her watery death had made her into a goddess. Instead of a bride, she had become a water divinity, the bride of the Nile. Her father honoured her with a splendid tomb decorated with two inscriptions. He would not mourn her, he said, because even though never married to an earthly groom, she had found something

better. 'Farewell, daughter; nymph be thy name,'³⁵ he wrote. The pun is untranslatable but contains many sexual meanings: *nymphê*, as well as the word for the goddess, is also the word for a bride and for the female genitalia. But most parents were not lucky enough to be able to celebrate the sexual apotheosis of their unwedded children. Epitaphs record the bitter sense of loss parents felt if their children died before marriage. Their untimely deaths are more unjust, because the deceased have been denied the sexual fulfilment they deserved. In this inscription from the necropolis at Karanis in the Fayyum, Eudemus and Philonicê mourn the death of their virgin daughter Lysandra:

Why do we suffer for our children so,
And treasure them, when Zeus is not our judge,
But Hades of the dead? My father cared for me for
twenty years
And yet I never knew the marriage bed,
I never slid on to the marriage bed:
Nor my companions beat the cedar doors,
The bedroom door upon my wedding night.
For death has taken my virginity,
I weep myself at my untimely death.
Weep for my mother, nursing me in vain,
Weep that she suckled me who now am dead
And cannot cherish her as she grows old.
Nor give my father grandchildren. O weep,
Weep for Lysandra, maidens, weep for the child
Of sad Philonicê and Eudemus, the daughter
Whom her parents bred in vain.
Weep for me too, all you who pass my tomb,
I died untimely and a virgin still.³⁶

These ideas of the sexual injustice of an early death are more naturally applicable to women, for whom the loss of virginity in marriage was so important. But death's denial of human sexual fulfilment could sometimes be applicable to young men, as in the second century CE grave inscription to Heracleides by his father Chaeremon, from the Greek city of Naucratis:

Nor saffron tapestries or wedding torch
Led to the bridal chamber of desire
Heracleides, instead they carried you
Down to your long home in the underworld.
Weeping, lord Hermes, weeping could not save,
Nor comfort you, nor challenge laws of fate.³⁷

It is interesting to see how these bereaved parents inscribed their own sexual experience onto that denied to their children. Lysandra's inscription sees her sexual fulfilment in marriage as a natural result of the parental care lavished on her. Parents can take comfort in seeing their children lead happy sexual lives, that is, sexual lives which result in offspring. Thus the emotional experience of parents and children was melded into an infinitely repeatable sexual cycle.

Failed Marriages and Divorce

Successful marriages make no impact on the written sources from Egypt. Only marriages that went wrong are documented, and they are not necessarily indicative of what the marital experience of most couples would have been like. Divorce agreements have very little to say about sex and never provide details of why the marriage broke down, such as through adultery, sexual incompatibility or unreasonable demands (though doubtless all these went on). This reticence is not surprising, since the deed of divorce has no rhetorical function in marital ideology, unlike the marriage contracts. Their main purpose is to sort out the return of any dowry and protect the partners from litigating against each other in the future.

Theoretically, no-fault divorce was available on demand in Egypt from either partner. For practical reasons, this may not have been quite so easy for the poor, but the census returns show plenty of examples of divorces in humble families. Marriages could end as informally as they had begun, without written documentation, by the partners ceasing to live together. There are instances of men and women who divorce several times, and even of a couple who divorced, but remained on good terms afterwards and subsequently remarried each other.³⁸ Frequent divorce and remarriage could lead to some complex jigsaw families, such as that of the donkey-driver Pasigenes of Tebtynis, whose household was registered in the census of 187 CE. Pasigenes, aged 61, had been divorced twice, first from Apollonous and then from Isidora. Both these women were still alive, living elsewhere. Pasigenes had a son with Apollonous and a daughter with Isidora: these half-siblings were now married to each other and living with their father and his third wife Heracleia, a freedwoman aged 40. She had herself been divorced, and her two sons by her first husband lived with her. Together, Heracleia and Pasigenes had a daughter aged 5.³⁹ Thus Pasigenes' house contained the offspring of four separate marriages.

So a wife's barrenness or inability to produce sons does not seem to have been a usual motive for ending a marriage, since, like Heracleia, many divorced women produced male children. Probably the most

common grounds for marriages ending were that people simply found themselves incompatible or grew tired of each other. Sometimes this happened after a long period of marriage. At Tebtynis in 138 CE, Cronion and his sister-wife Taorsenouphis divorced after more than thirty years of marriage by *agraphos gamos*.⁴⁰ Of course, the emotional history of Cronions and Taorsenouphis' long marriage is not known. It may well have been a stormy series of infidelities, separations and reconciliations. In this case, Taorsenouphis does not seem to have been replaced by a younger woman, though this did happen. Pasigenes' successive marriages were to progressively younger women, so that his son by his first wife was only a few years his third wife's junior.

On the other hand, some unions only lasted a very short time. Zois and Antipatrus married at Alexandria in the November of 14 BCE: less than five months later they were arranging their divorce. The deed which dissolved their short-lived marriage is an example of no-fault divorce by mutual agreement. Something must have gone drastically wrong for things to break up so quickly, but the document (BGU IV 1103) is typically discreet:

Zois and Antipatrus declare that they have separated from each other, severing the union which they had formed on the basis of an agreement made through the same tribunal in the month of Hathyr of this current 17th year of Caesar, and Zois acknowledges that she has received from Antipatrus by hand from his house the material which he received for dowry, clothes to the value of 120 drachma and a pair of gold earrings. The agreement of marriage shall henceforth be null. . . and hereafter it shall be lawful both for Zois to marry another man and for Antipatrus to marry another woman without either of them being answerable.

Later documents are equally vague: they say 'a bad spirit' (*ponêros daimôn*) has come between the couple so that they are no longer able to cohabit. Less formal accounts of actual events leading to marital break-up come in various petitions. Such texts cannot be taken entirely at face value, because the petitioners wanted to obtain something from the other party, and were therefore anxious to present themselves in the most favourable light and lambast the other person. Wronged women claim to 'have acted blamelessly in every respect' and 'to have had no thought of another man'⁴¹ during their unhappy marriages. However, complaints about the bad behaviour of the partners, usually the men, at least show what the inverse of the hoped-for affective relationship might be.

A woman called Dionysia relates a plausible-sounding story in a

petition for money (BGU VIII 1848) which she directed towards her father-in-law Isidorus in about 46 BCE. Dionysia had married Apollonius son of Isidorus with contractual support, Dionysia bringing a dowry of 2000 drachmas. They had a daughter together. About two years before lodging the petition, Apollonius deserted Dionysia, running off to Alexandria, where Dionysia claimed that he had taken up with another woman, upon whom Apollonius fathered another child. Dionysia was by now very short of money. She and her daughter were being looked after by her brother in the country. She claimed that Apollonius had told his father to sell some property and return Dionysia's dowry to her, but Isidorus had not done so. Accordingly she requests that Isidorus be summoned and made to return her dowry so that she has some money. Obviously Dionysia has no hopes of saving her marriage to Apollonius and wants to salvage what she can from the whole imbroglio.

In a strange document (P. Oxy. VI 903) from Oxyrhynchus, another woman narrates a much more lurid train of events leading to the breakdown of her marriage. The document seems to be some kind of affidavit, though without any indication of author, date or addressee it is not easy to guess why it was drawn up. Carefully written out in an elegant hand, it does not look like a draft, such as for a divorce petition (see Plate 7). At all events, it shows how this unknown woman's marriage to an abusive husband began to go terribly wrong. The marriage started as an *agraphos gamos*, which was only formalised by a contract after some time. The husband and wife were from the propertied classes, and the wife was a Christian. Many of the details are obscure, but it is interesting to see how the whole extended household was implicated in the conflict between the couple. The man accused the staff of theft and imprisoned them. The slaves were subjected to brutal treatment by the husband, perhaps to intimidate the wife, but apparently they took her side. Some of his violent actions have disturbingly sadistic undertones, especially when he strips his wife's foster-daughter and torments them with fire. This anonymous woman's breathless, episodic account of her disastrous marriage has a real immediacy:

Regarding all the outrageous things that he uttered against me. He shut up his own slaves and mine with my foster-daughters and his overseer and son for seven whole days in the cellars, having acted violently towards his slaves and my slave Zoe and nearly killed them with blows; and he applied fire to my foster-daughters after stripping them naked, which is contrary to the laws. He also said to the same foster-daughters, 'Give up all that is hers,' and they replied, 'We

don't have anything of hers.' He said to the slaves when they were being beaten, 'What did she take from my house?' and even under torture they said, 'She has taken nothing of yours, all your property is safe.'

In spite of all this, the woman made an effort to patch up the relationship. A marriage contract was drawn up and the local bishops tried to mediate, but things deteriorated still further. There were more arguments about theft by the slaves. The husband locked the woman out of the house and screamed abuse at her. He stole her money: he threatened to go and live with a prostitute. With the resignation of someone at the end of her tether, she concludes her story, 'God knows that all this is true.'

After experiences like this, it is unsurprising that there was a tendency among older divorced women not to remarry. Bagnall and Frier have demonstrated that women who were divorced or widowed after the age of 30–35 would be unlikely to get married again.⁴² This may represent choice by the women themselves, particularly if they were financially secure: if one is to believe Rousselle, an element of sexual revulsion may be considered. There is also the unpalatable likelihood that an older woman, especially with children, was not seen as a desirable commodity in the marriage market. When older men married or re-married, they would be much more likely to have a younger spouse. Of course, the fact that a woman might expect to remain single if she had no partner after her mid-30s need not necessarily imply that she was to remain sexually celibate for the rest of her life.

Sex Outside Marriage

The stories of Dionysia and the maltreated woman from Oxyrhynchus show that men had the chance to abandon their wives and have liaisons with other women, usually in towns. As with pre-marital sex, men's accessibility to sexual partners other than wives may have partly depended on their financial status and geographical location. In the natural extension of patriarchy, a male slave-owner could have use of all the subject bodies in his household. At least part of the reason for purchasing female slaves was that they should breed more slaves. There is reason to believe that sometimes the owner impregnated them himself. This may be the situation in a census return of 173 CE (BGU II 447). The declarant Ptollas, aged 48, lives with his sister-wife Ptolemais in a house at Karanis in the Fayyum. Also in the household are two slaves, Copeia and her daughter Sarapias, who belong to a man resident elsewhere. Each woman has two young children, Copeia

two sons aged 6 and 4, Sarapias a daughter aged 4 and a new-born son. There are no male slaves in the house and it is feasible that the female slaves had been impregnated by one of the free men of the household.

The nature of sexual relationships between free men and slave women would have varied considerably. On the one hand, there is no reason to doubt that slaveowners used slaves for casual sex: but this kind of encounter usually leaves no documentary traces.⁴³ Fear and tension about the otherly body of the slave need not preclude enjoying that body sexually: indeed, sexual acts between owners and slaves could be seen reassuringly to enforce inequality, at least from the owner's point of view. Slaves may also have had a function in optimising the fertility of free married women by redistributing their husbands' sexual activities, which might otherwise result in a dangerous pregnancy for the wife. The intercourse of a husband with the slaves could be seen as a way of regulating his wife's pregnancies by spacing them out. On the other hand, there are instances of men contracting enduring relationships with slave women who were wives in all but name. Relevant here are the provisions made for his natural family by Gaius Longinus Castor, a Roman veteran living at Karanis, who had formerly served in the praetorian fleet at Misenum near Naples. His will (BGU I 326) has been much discussed by students of Roman law, but it also reveals an interesting sexual scenario that was probably not uncommon among military personnel. In the small town of Karanis at the same time as Castor, at least one other serviceman had an illegitimate family.⁴⁴

Castor drew up a will in late October 189 CE, and added codicils shortly before his death early in 194. His main heirs are two slave women, Marcella and Cleopatra, both aged over 30, who are to be freed. If Marcella dies, her share of the estate is to go to individuals called Sarapion, Socrates and Longus. If Cleopatra predeceases Castor, someone called Nilus receives her share. Cleopatra's daughter Sarapias is also manumitted and receives a separate legacy of six and a quarter arouras of land, a third of a palm grove and third shares in two houses. Therefore Sarapias goes from being a slave to the owner of not insubstantial property.

It is not difficult to assume a sexual situation behind Castor's will. Marcella and Cleopatra are not young girls, but mature women with several children. In all probability, Marcella and Cleopatra were Castor's long-standing common-law wives and Castor was the father of some or all of their children. His relationship with Cleopatra and Marcella was obviously close and affectionate enough for him to want them to be left financially comfortable after his death and not run the risk of being sold and separated from their children. When Castor

made his will, Roman soldiers were still not free to marry until after honourable discharge. Even if Castor had been fully discharged by the time of his death and could have freed one of the slaves and adopted her offspring, the other woman would have suffered, because bigamy was not allowed. This raises the question of the sequence of Castor's liaisons. Did he have relationships with Cleopatra and Marcella simultaneously, as concubines, or had his relationship with one of the women ended, though they remained on good terms afterwards? Ironically, Roman marriage regulations penalised Castor's kindness to his slaves. He is obliged to leave his estate to individuals who in legal terms are not his kin, and Cleopatra and Marcella were obliged to pay a 5 per cent tax to the fisc.

An unusually enthusiastic letter (P. Oxy. XIV 1676), from a former owner to a freedwoman, testifies to the real depth of feeling some owners developed for their slaves.⁴⁵ The most telling clue comes in the address on the back: 'Deliver to Aplonarion from her patron Flavius Herculanus.' This is a former master writing to his emancipated slave:

Flavius Herculanus to the sweetest and most honoured Aplonarion, very many greetings. I rejoiced greatly on receiving your letter . . . but I was exceedingly distressed that you did not come for my boy's birthday, both you and your husband, for you could have enjoyed yourself for many days with him here too. But doubtless you had something more important to do, which is why you disdained us. I wish you to be always happy, as much as I wish it for myself, but once again I grieve that you are away from me. If you are not unhappy away from me, I rejoice in your happiness, though I myself worry when I do not see you.

'Beauty, intelligence and strength are oblivious to status, as are the feelings they inspire. But, into the relations implied by these feelings, status introduces an element that transforms them into a power game – and it is one that operates in both directions.'⁴⁶

Whether free women had sexual relationships with male slaves is not easy to trace, at least in the documentary record. A stock character in Greek literature from Egypt is the cruel mistress who bribes or forces her male slaves to have sex with her, usually with catastrophic results for the slave.⁴⁷ These tales are probably to be seen as articulations of male distrust of women rather than any indication of what really went on between women and male slaves.

The ease with which free people could engage in casual adultery or even long-standing affairs is similarly hard to reconstruct. It is illuminating to search the standard papyrological dictionaries for

occurrences of the Greek word for adulterer, *moichos*. There are very few examples, mostly in contexts that are damaged or hard to interpret. Take, for instance, this fragmentary petition from Antinoöpolis (P. Ant. I 36) dated 6 June 326 CE. The text starts promisingly enough, but becomes too fragmentary to reconstruct. 'The officer of the law knows how to frustrate the purposes of those who choose to live in a manner at odds with public good order. Now a certain Antinous of the same city, a headstrong fellow, as though taking advantage of my good nature [...] yesterday [. . .] our house [. . .] to commit adultery.' An accusation of rape? Or did the headstrong Antinous inveigle his way into the petitioner's house, taking advantage of his good nature, and seduce his wife? One cannot know.

Again, the most likely explanation for this documentary silence on adultery is that this kind of sexual transaction remains unrecorded by its very nature. If people found their partners committing adultery, they would take their own private steps to deal with it. Even if an act of adultery led to a divorce, the legal documentation would not refer to it. The likelihood is that people did sometimes have consensual sexual relationships outside marriage, but they are going to be virtually impossible to trace. None the less, a few things can be said. People could surely have contrived to commit adultery in the towns and villages of Græco-Roman Egypt, if they were able to do so in the cramped confines of the village at Deir el-Medina in the New Kingdom. In one papyrus from this site, a man named Paneb is accused of three separate acts of adultery (one with the same woman when married to different men), but this has to be taken in the context of the other allegations against him, such as bribery, violence and insubordination to superiors. His supposed sexual misconduct may be only part of a larger attempt to discredit him. Housing conditions may not be particularly relevant. People could seize the opportunity for illicit sex when they did not expect to be interrupted, in the same way that they seized opportunities for illicit physical violence, which often takes place indoors. One could also go out of doors: in a papyrus relating to a case of adultery at Deir el-Medina, a man is accused of having intercourse with a married woman 'in the place of carrying torches', somewhere outside the boundaries of the village.⁴⁸ Or, as in so many classical sources, a compliant friend could be persuaded to lend their house for a sexual rendezvous. In Græco-Roman Egypt there may have been more opportunities for adultery in towns than in villages, though illegitimate births seem to have been more common in small communities. Perhaps these children result from long-standing relationships where the partners were not free to marry, like the family of Gaius Longinus Castor, rather than from casual unions.

Maybe there would have been greater possibilities in the more

mobile atmosphere of the cities. One case of adultery in an urban environment is preserved in a damaged collection of quasi-legal texts from Hermopolis (BGU IV 1024).⁴⁹ A husband surprises his wife in bed with her lover, who manages to escape. The man returns to his wife and kills her with the sword intended for the lover. The murdered woman, ironically, is called Sophronia, a name embodying the harmony and virtuous self-control a woman should contribute to a marriage. I am not sure about the extent to which this case reflects actuality. The woman's name, in particular, seems too good to be true. But even if this story was produced for some moral or discursive purpose, the underlying circumstances must have been comprehensible. What happened to the murderous husband in this case is irrecoverable, as the text is too damaged. Under Roman law, he would be guilty of murder. A man who caught his wife in adultery would only be allowed to kill the lover if he caught them in his own house, and in any case would not be permitted to kill his wife. Diodorus Siculus says that in Egypt the punishments for consensual adultery with a free married woman were 1000 lashes for the man and the woman to be mutilated by having her nose cut off.⁵⁰ Diodorus' statement may not reflect actual practices.

After the murder of Sophronia, the text goes on to discuss the murder of a prostitute at Alexandria. Prostitutes are the most obvious recourse for those seeking sex outside marriage; but their complex status and function within the erotic macrocosm of Græco-Roman Egypt demands that they are examined in their own right, as a particular category of sexual beings. It is time to turn from the 'legitimate sensuality' of marriage to the world of commercial sex.

1 Rostovtzeff (1957) 273.

2 Bagnall and Frier (1994).

3 Bagnall and Frier (1994) 116–22; on female fertility within marriage, 135–55.

4 This document, although written in Latin, shows an interesting fusion of Greek and Roman marriage practices.

5 P. Brux. I 10: see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 260.

6 This is a regular cliché of crypto-anthropological literature on growing up in modern Egypt: see e.g. Critchfield (1978) 17.

7 For monks raping women, see Rousselle (1988) 144–5, with references.

8 Although found at Hermopolis, the events BGU IV 1024 describes are best taken as happening in Alexandria even when they are not explicitly stated to be. Bagnall (1993) 198 assumes the Alexandrian setting of the text. For more on this text, see Chapter 5.

9 BGU I 118 i; see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 269.

10 Bataille (1987) 109.

11 This figure is suggested by Bagnall and Frier (1994) 144–5.

12 Rousselle (1988) 93–4.

13 Carter (1979) 11.

- 14 This seems to have been the case at Montailou in medieval France, where people lived in similarly intimate conditions to Egypt: see LeRoy Ladurie (1980) 167–91. On the question generally, see Flandrin (1979) 92–102.
- 15 I read the standard wish in magical spells that the enchanted woman will leave behind her home and relatives as a metaphor for her utter subordination to the wishes of the enchanter rather than necessarily indicating that the woman was in such a family situation.
- 16 Generally pessimistic is Bradley (1991): Brown (1988) 13–14 and Dixon (1992) propose variants on the so-called ‘new conjugality.’
- 17 See Veyne (1987) 33–49, a summary of his influential earlier article. Veyne (1978): Foucault (1984) and (1988) fuses the ideas of Veyne with his reading of the Stoic philosophers to develop the notion of the wife as the significant other in emotional relationships. Goldhill (1995) does not agree with either Veyne or Foucault.
- 18 P. British Museum 10508.20.19 and 25.14: text in Glanville (1955) = Lichtheim (1980) 161–80.
- 19 Hopkins (1980) 341.
- 20 P. Eleph. I 1.9.
- 21 P. Oxy. X 1273.22–4.
- 22 E.g. P. Ryl. I 154 of 66 CE, P. Oxy. VI 905.
- 23 There is a huge bibliography on consanguineous marriage, best summarised by Bagnall and Frier (1994) 127 n. 62. The standard studies are Hopkins (1980) and Goody (1990), both partly refuted by Shaw (1992).
- 24 Lévi-Strauss (1949) 30.
- 25 Shaw (1992).
- 26 Shaw (1992) 292.
- 27 Bagnall and Frier (1994) 133.
- 28 Bagnall and Frier (1994) 124.
- 29 P. Berl. Leihg. I 17: see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 235.
- 30 Bagnall and Frier (1994) 134.
- 31 Achilles Tatius V 14.
- 32 See Montserrat *et al.* (1994) 44–5.
- 33 See e.g. P. Ant. II 93, where jewellery seems to be sold to purchase perfumes for a wedding.
- 34 P. Cair. Masp. II 67179, translation following the revised text of MacCoull (1988) 88.
- 35 Text from Bernand (1969) no. 87 = SB V 7540.5.
- 36 Text from Bernand (1969) no. 83 : translation courtesy of Peter Davidson.
- 37 Text from Bernand (1969) no. 67: translation courtesy of Peter Davidson.
- 38 Multiple divorce: see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 122, and e.g. SB XIV 11355. The couple who remarried each other are Apollonarian and Horion in P. Oxy. XII 1473.
- 39 For Pasigenes’ family, see P. Tebt. II 322 = Sel. Pap. II 313.
- 40 See P. Kronion 52 = P. Mil. Vogl. II 85.
- 41 P. Tebt. II 334.
- 42 Bagnall and Frier (1994) 153–4 and [figure 6.1](#).
- 43 See ,however the beginning of [Chapter 6](#) for men using slaves for homosexual relations.
- 44 See Bagnall and Frier (1994) 156 and 251 for the illegitimate family of Sempromus Herminus.
- 45 For more on this letter, see pages 7–8.
- 46 Rousselle (1989) 311–12.
- 47 E.g. P. Oxy. III 413, the so-called ‘Adulteress mime’; P. Oxy. XLVII 3331, where a brutish mistress ‘as lustful as a sow’ forces the slave Aesop to have sex with her ten

times.

48 See Eyre (1984) 93–4 for adultery at Deir el-Medina.

49 The episode of the woman with two lovers has already been discussed. There is more on the whole text in the next chapter.

50 Diodorus Siculus 178.

[5]

Sex for Sale

The 'Sex Industry' in Græco-Roman Egypt

'Every town is filled with all kinds of licentiousness,' said St Anthanasius about the cities of Egypt in the fourth century CE.¹ Of course, the Christian saint had his own ideological stance on the sexual habits of the pagan Roman East, but his dictum backs up many others by earlier writers to the effect that Egypt was a garden of earthly delights, the *ne plus ultra* of libidinosity where sex was easily available. As far back as the third century BCE, the comic writer Herodas had put the same idea (without the judgemental Christian perspective) into the mouth of one of his characters, Gyllis the old procuress:

Egypt is the very home of Aphrodite, for everything good that exists and is produced in the world is in Egypt: wealth ... wine, all good things one can desire, and the women! More in number than the sky boasts stars, and their looks! Like the goddesses who once went to have their beauty judged by Paris, I swear it by Demeter.²

Conversely, the documentary evidence for the so-called oldest profession in the world in Græco-Roman Egypt is not extensive and is scattered both geographically and chronologically, but enough material does survive to suggest that the organisation of the prostitution business and of those that plied it varied considerably according to time and local circumstances. A few ostraca and one well known inscription deal with the taxation of earnings from prostitution. One or two papyri are informative about the minutiae of leasing and taxing premises for prostitution. Apart from this, the documentary record is almost silent. Unlike the prostitutes of Pompeii, whose names, prices, sexual specialities and even living quarters are all preserved, the prostitutes of Egypt have left behind few vestiges of their lives. Therefore very little is known about the daily lives of prostitutes in Egypt - how old they were, what future they faced when they stopped working, and what kind of sexual services they offered

their clients. This lack of evidence, of course, need not necessarily suggest that prostitution was uncommon in Egypt; indeed, its very paucity might imply exactly the opposite. In spite of the diversity of the evidence, one or two factors are constant: prostitutes seem to have been mobile or based in a large urban area, and most were under the control of a man.

St Athanasius' definition of the licentiousness that was so prevalent in the cities of Egypt would not have confined itself to prostitution alone. To borrow a term from modern discourse on pornography, he was condemning the 'sex industry' of Egypt and its workers; and consequently dancers both male and female, pantomimists, flute-girls, castanet-players and actresses would also have come under the umbrella of his opprobrium. Any society in which prostitution is regularly practised encompasses many different kinds and grades of operator, ranging from the castanet-dancer or flute-player turning a few tricks on the side, to the slave forced by her owner to work as a prostitute. There are representatives of all these types in the documentary record, though most people who actually worked as prostitutes of whatever kind must have gone unrecorded as such. This would have been particularly true of slave prostitutes. One of the most common terms used to designate slaves in the papyri is the word *sômata*, literally 'bodies', an indication of how these individuals were viewed by their owners. Since their 'bodies' were entirely at the disposal of their masters, a slave forced to work as a prostitute would need only to be recorded by social rather than professional status – the potential status as prostitute (or dancer or wet-nurse or wool-worker) was implicit in the designation as slave.

The Greek words used for prostitutes in the documents from Egypt, *pome*, *paidiskê* and *hetaira*, seem to make little distinction between different branches of the profession. *Paidiskê* always denotes a slave prostitute. In classical Athens, however, *pornê* and *hetaira* were replete with implications for the women's status on a broader level. *Hetaira* is often (and somewhat misleadingly) translated as 'courtesan', but in fact is virtually untranslatable: its nuances of meaning embodied the mobile, sexually available woman who was diametrically opposite to the controlled wife or *gynê*, and vice versa. Occupying the intermediate ground was the *pornê* (plural *pornai*), who was probably a slave prostitute. *Pornê* originally bore an implication of the number of clients the woman had and the durability of her relationships with them.³ In other words, *pornai* were for casual sex, whereas *hetairai* could be for more lasting relationships. Thus *gynê*, *hetaira* and *pornê* are status designations rather than professional names. Eventually *hetaira* and *pome* seem to lose their more precise meanings: in the Roman period they have become virtually synonymous, vague generic

terms for prostitutes.⁴ In Coptic Christian discourse, *pornê* can be used indiscriminately to describe all non-monastic women: their sexually available status is indistinguishable from their gender. In fact, social change in the Hellenistic world and beyond had rendered the old Athenian polarity between *hetaira*/prostitute and *gynê*/wife less meaningful, and had also radically altered the profession of *hetaira*. The Athenian *hetairai* were phenomena of that culture, women whose social function reflected more general ideas about women, sexuality and marriage unique to that time and place. Consequently, there is very little evidence from Græco-Roman Egypt for ‘high-class courtesans’ (if one is to accept that translation of *hetairai*). From Ptolemaic Egypt, there are some attestations of women who are called by the designation *hetaira*,⁵ almost all of them royal mistresses who moved in court circles at Alexandria. Irene and Thais were mistresses of Ptolemy I; Hippê (‘mare’) was the *hetaira* of the notoriously priapic Ptolemy IV. Some of them even occupied significant priestly positions in state cults and were involved in lucrative economic activities related to high status, such as owning Nile barges.⁶ These women, however, seem to occupy positions as courtiers analogous to that of the *maîtresses en titre* of Louis XV, and unlike the Athenian *hetairai* seem never to have actually worked as prostitutes (although some of them are supposed to have once been slaves or entertainers). Such women would have been very much in a minority, and most of the Egyptian women who are designated as *hetairai* or *pornai* in the documents seem to be comparatively humble. The term *dêmosia pornê*, ‘public prostitute’, also occurs, perhaps having some of the overtones of the English legal term ‘common prostitute’, though in some sources it designates a freedwoman working as a prostitute.⁷ In one papyrus, discussed in detail below, *dêmosia pornê* is used to describe a free woman working in a municipal brothel in Alexandria. She had been handed over to a brothel-keeper by her old mother, and when working as a prostitute continued contributing to her mother’s upkeep. Thus she could not have been sold as a slave to the brothel-keeper, or she would not have been able to give any of her prostitution earnings to her mother.

The question of what proportions of slaves and free women engaged in prostitution is very difficult to establish. A papyrus (PSI IX 1055 a) from a town in the Fayyum, dated 265 CE, suggests that at least some slave women worked in the town brothels. The text is very fragmentary, but the situation seems fairly clear. A man called Pyrrhus son of Podarius was, with another man, the proprietor of brothels at an unknown town in the Arsinoite nome, probably not the metropolis itself. He owed money for the rental of these brothels (*koinēia*) and was forced to sell various things to raise the money, including a slave

woman called Canthara who is said to 'have been with them formerly', probably working in the brothel herself. Other women who engaged in prostitution, however, were certainly free, and were perhaps forced into it by economic necessity, whether their own or that of their families. Some urban prostitutes were certainly foreigners, but the women working as prostitutes in towns in Upper Egypt mostly have Egyptian names and may well have been local women.⁸ The Christian devotional narratives of Egyptian prostitutes who subsequently repent to become anchoresses and saints – the so-called 'harlots of the desert' – introduce a character that will reappear in later mythologies of prostitution: the naïve country girl who 'goes to the bad' in the wicked city. These texts give a new reason for the woman becoming a 'harlot' – her lustfulness. 'I wanted to go [into prostitution] so that I might soon have many more lovers for my lust,' says one of the harlot-saints.⁹ One may doubt how often this was a motive in actuality; but it is interesting to note that apart from the magical papyri, these moral tales about reformed prostitutes are among the few texts from the ancient world to hint at a discourse about women's enjoyment of sex as something freely chosen by them rather than forced upon them by a man – though of course the authors of the Christian literature had a rather different polemical standpoint.

The 'harlots of the desert' are the last actors in a long drama of legendary whores working in Egypt. The most prominent of these is Rhodopis, who was probably a real historical character. Tradition made her a Thracian by birth, and a fellow-slave of Æsop. She was sent to Egypt by her owner to work at the Greek colony of Naucratis, where she had an affair with Charaxus, brother of the poet Sappho, which was apparently financially and emotionally ruinous for him. Sappho rebukes Charaxus for his infatuation in a poem, fragments of which were found at Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. I 7). At this point, however, fiction takes over. Rhodopis somehow becomes conflated with several indigenous mythical females: a daughter of Cheops who built one of the Giza pyramids with what she earned on her back;¹⁰ a dangerously rapacious, succubus-like creature who consumes the men who encounter her;¹¹ and even a proto-Cinderella. The latter Rhodopis comes up in a tale recounted by Strabo (XVII 1.33): while she was in her bath, an eagle stole one of her sandals, and took it to Memphis, where the king was administering justice in the open air. 'When the eagle arrived above his head, it flung the sandal into his lap; and the king, stirred both by the beautiful shape of the sandal and by the strangeness of the occurrence, sent men in all directions into the country in quest of the woman who wore the sandal; and when she was found in the city of Naucratis, she was brought up to Memphis, and became the wife of the king.' When she died, she was honoured

with a pyramid. Thus Rhodopis, the slave-girl from Thrace, comes to embody all kinds of different fictions of prostitutes. She is the elegant courtesan who is a fit consort for a king. She is the vampire who will suck a man dry and discard him. She is the ultimate user of men in a rags-to- riches *volte-face* of fortune.

The re-inventions of Rhodopis find their parallels in other texts about prostitutes from Egypt. It seems to me that these imply no moral criticism of prostitution as an institution. What they are concerned about is when involvement with prostitutes oversteps the sexual protocols. 'He who makes love to a woman of the streets will have his purse cut open; ... do not send a prostitute out on your business: she will turn it to her own advantage.'¹² Demotic instructional maxims like these represent prostitutes as grasping, mercenary creatures potentially ruinous to a man's financial state, a common topos of the representation of prostitutes. The Greek documents paint a similar picture of the possible dangers of involvement with such women. In 221 BCE a man called Sopolis wrote a petition (P. Enteux. 49) to Ptolemy IV about the dealings of the prostitute Demo, whom he claimed had tricked his under-age son into borrowing 1000 drachmas. However, this is only one part of the picture, and when considering ancient views of prostitution, one must first remember that ancient and modern views of human transactions would have been very different, because of widespread slavery and the sexual availability of slaves. The main determinant for calling somebody a prostitute was their sexual availability, rather than the question of money changing hands that determines it nowadays.

Prostitution was a profession like any other: the very fact that in Roman Egypt prostitutes were taxed, and not taxed punitively, points to the legitimacy of their business. This does not imply, however, that prostitutes and sex industry workers were viewed without suspicion as harmless individuals trying to earn an honest living. Although prostitutes may have worked in marginal areas of the city, around the docks or the city gates, prostitution was more than just one of the commercial activities targeted towards strangers to the city. Rather it was something produced by the male society of the city for its own purposes, whether physical or symbolic. To Christian writers at Alexandria like Clement and Dio Chrysostom, the prostitute was the female figure of the metropolitan environment *par excellence*. Out on the streets of the great city or hanging around in its taverns, they were visible and recognisable, perfect illustrations of the paradoxical idea that what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central. Dio Chrysostom used a metaphor drawn from local prostitution to inveigh against the disorderliness of the Alexandrians: 'You act like whores who, however unrestrained they may be inside the house, should still

behave in an orderly fashion outside; but it is predominantly in the streets that they misconduct themselves most.’¹³

The ‘wild’ and ‘unrestrained’ image of the prostitute may have carried over into what the clients actually wanted to do with their bodies. ‘We have wives to bear us children, slaves to take care of our bodies, and concubines for pleasure,’ said the Athenian orator Apollodorus in the 5th century BCE: and though changing attitudes to marriage had made these polarities less stark, prostitutes were still very much creatures for sexual pleasure in the Hellenistic world. In the third century BCE, a man called Artemidorus hymned the pleasures of revelry and women in a letter (PSI IV 352) to Zenon, the manager of the Fayyum estates of Ptolemy Us finance minister: ‘Wine and prostitutes for ever!’ Anthropology suggests that the notion of wives and prostitutes providing different ‘quality’ sex may well have a wide currency. A study¹⁴ in the 1970s of the sexual positions used in a Peruvian brothel proposed that the positions reflected a wider social dichotomy between prostitutes and married women. In Peruvian culture, ‘asexual’ wives are seen as domestic, familiar and safe, ‘sexual’ whores are public, exotic and dangerous. Consequently the clients required (and were willing to pay for) different sexual services from prostitutes than those they expected from their wives, including various ‘exotic’ positions. The same idea that prostitutes were for sexual acts you could not perform with your wife may well have been true in Græco-Roman Egypt. A magical papyrus (PGM XXXVI 142), seeking to make a woman burn with frenzied passion for a man, says: ‘if she wishes to fall asleep, spread knotted leather whips under her and thorns under her temples, so that she will consent to whorish sex.’ The implication seems clear: in her abandonment and lust for the enchanter, the enchanted woman will lose her socialised inhibitions and act like a whore in bed.

Literature also talks about the joy that could be found with Egyptian prostitutes, who were well known at Rome. The Latin elegist Propertius, writing in the first century CE, favourably compared the delights of a no-strings encounter with an Egyptian prostitute against the tedious demands of adultery with a woman of one’s own class. Dressed in her prostitute’s garb of mules and a short tunic, Propertius’ girl is walking her beat on the Via Sacra, recognisable, ready and willing:

Give me professional girls, street girls free to all comers,
Give me the loose-shod free-lance ready for any
encounter ...

Girls from the Delta, professional Eastern girls, suit me,
These are my joy now, bourgeois adulteries bore me.

Roman women are man-traps, suburban courtesans:
Free men like me have had it with what they call love.¹⁵

Prostitution was more than something one just did with one's body. In ancient terms, it was a *technê*, a learnable skill or profession requiring at least some skill and knowledge, derived either from teaching or personal experience. In general, it is undesirable for women to have *technê*, because the possession of knowledge implies some kind of potential to control. Thais, the whore turned saint, enjoyed the power of her sexual hold over her lovers as much as the wealth and sex she had from them. The Greek medical writers whose ideas were known in Egypt classed prostitutes with midwives and wet-nurses as women having a *technê* with a potentially dangerous and threatening knowledge. Midwives and prostitutes knew about sex, and about the control of the hidden internal workings of the female body. Their private discussions about sex could subvert the dominant discourse of male superiority by ridiculing men and their sexual prowess. The professional mobility required of midwives and prostitutes rendered their 'technical' knowledge doubly seditious and dangerous, because they were able to assert it all over the public male domain. The writers of the Hippocratic corpus frequently mention women's oral traditions about knowledge of their own bodies,¹⁶ and to Pliny the Elder midwives and prostitutes are the only feasible informants about a woman's sexuality.¹⁷ One might speculate that the repertory of Egyptian women's knowledge was augmented by the use of amulets and magical spells, many of which deal with contraception. 'Let the sexual organs and womb of woman X be open, and let her be bloody day and night,' says one abortifacient spell (PGM LXII 103–6).

The *technê* of prostitutes was not just confined to women's reproductive lives, however. Fabled Egyptian *hetairai* like Elephantis were credited with the authorship of a number of sexual 'how to' books, ancient *Kama Sūtras*. None of Elephantis' works has survived, but they seem to have been instructional manuals perceived on the same level as other types of didactic works. These sought to control female knowledge by placing it in a taxonomy, on the principle that if knowledge is ordered, it cannot be threatening to men.

Fragments of one such text (P. Oxy. XXXIX 2891) by the legendary *hetaira* Philaenis of Samos have survived from Oxyrhynchus.¹⁸ The remains are unfortunately very scanty, but give some inkling of what the sex manual genre might have been like. The papyrus preserves two adjoining columns from the upper margin of the very beginning of a roll. The text starts with a preamble introducing the author and the purpose of the work; this must have been fairly brief, because the second column of the papyrus starts with a new chapter heading,

about how the potential seducer should neglect his appearance:

Philaenis of Samos, daughter of Ocymenes, wrote this work for those who wish to pursue their life with [knowledge] and not to expend their labours on such matters in an irrelevant way [...]

Concerning Seductions. Accordingly, the seducer should be unadorned and uncombed, so that he does not [seem] to the woman to be too concerned about the matter in hand.

The next comparatively substantial fragment again bears the remains of two columns, though virtually nothing is left of the first. The second column seems to be talking about flattery:

with the thought that [...] saying that the [plain] woman is the equal of a goddess, the ugly woman is charming, the elderly one is like a young girl.¹⁹

The text breaks off with the beginning of a new chapter which is headed *Concerning Kisses*. Although extremely fragmentary, two things are clear about the text. The first is that it is intended to be a practical guide to those who want to learn the ways of love and not waste time about it. The narrative is bald, entirely free of erotic rhetoric and literary artifice, and progresses along the stages of seduction systematically: first how to allay any suspicions the woman might have so as to gain access to her, then how to loosen her reserve by flattery. This should then lead to you being able to kiss her, and in due course to have intercourse with her. The second is the way that the author places everything in a category. Women are divided up into types x, y and z, whom the seducer is to approach, and presumably make love to, in ways x, y and z. This would have been the content of the lost final section of Philaenis' book, *Concerning Sexual Positions*. Women are made love to according to their somatotypes. This neat ordering is paralleled in Ovid's *Art of Love* III, which culminates in advice about how to have intercourse with different physical types of women: women with pretty faces lie supine, women with nice backs are taken from behind, very petite women should go on top of the man. The fragments of Philaenis also suggest that men do not know instinctively how to make love, and that the only women suitable to instruct them are whores, who have the professional *technê*. However, the sexual instructions of Philaenis are non-threatening to men: rather 'they comfort the male reader by assuring him that he will meet nothing unexpected in the sexual world.'²⁰ Hers is a dangerous knowledge rendered safe.

Prostitutes were able to endanger the world of men by means other

than their minatory 'knowing' status. As the stories about Rhodopis show, destruction can result from infatuation with such women. This idea is a central one of the Demotic story-cycle constructed around the historical character of Setne Khaemwese, a son of Ramesses II, which is preserved on a papyrus of the late Ptolemaic period now in Cairo.²¹ In a dream sequence that is only revealed as such at the end of the narrative, Setne encounters Tabubu, who is 'like no other woman in appearance': gorgeously bejewelled and dressed in transparent garments, she is accompanied by a retinue of attendants. When Setne visits her apartments they too are splendidly furnished and equipped, a realm to delight the senses: incense is burning in a brazier, there are scented unguents of a quality fit for a pharaoh, and the floor is 'adorned with real lapis-lazuli and real turquoise; many couches were on it, spread with royal linen, and many golden cups were on the table.' Setne, overcome with desire for Tabubu, says to her, 'Let us accomplish what we have come here for,' but Tabubu is not giving away anything free. She replies: 'If you desire to do what you wish with me you must make for me a deed of maintenance and of compensation in money for everything, all goods belonging to you.' Even when this is done, she still refuses to submit to Setne without further demands: she asks that Setne allow her to have his children murdered, which he permits. Even then, Setne does not accomplish what he wanted with Tabubu, because he wakes up too soon, hot, sweaty and naked, with his penis limp. He has ejaculated prematurely, wasting precious, fertilising sperm on an incorporeal phantasm.²²

Tabubu is a nightmare figure, more of a succubus than an archetypal prostitute. For a society which places such emphasis on female reproduction, she is also the ultimate transgressive figure: a woman who causes the death of children. The Tabubu episode gives an indication of the destructive force of non-reproductive sex, which can lead one to place oneself outside society by begging oneself and murdering one's children, and also to damage oneself physically by the waste of sperm. Some very similar ideas are expressed by the dream interpreter Artemidorus, writing in the second century CE, when he discusses the predictive qualities of dreams about visiting prostitutes:

Intercourse with prostitutes at brothels indicates a little embarrassment and some expense: people who frequent these women are ashamed and also spend money ... it would be good to (dream of) entering brothels and being able to leave, as being unable to leave is bad. I know someone who dreamed that he entered a whorehouse and was unable to leave, and who died a few days afterwards, as was the logical result of

his dream. The brothel is known as a common place (*koineion*), like that which receives corpses, and much sperm perishes there. Thus it is reasonable that this place should resemble death.²³

The enduring nature of the idea that the power of prostitutes could lead to social and physical annihilation is shown by a passage in the life of the Egyptian harlot-saint Thaïs, written at least seven centuries after the story of Setne and Tabubu.

There was a certain harlot called Thaïs and she was so beautiful that many for her sake sold all that they had and reduced themselves to utter poverty; quarrels arose among her lovers and often the doorstep of this girl's house was soaked with the blood of young men.²⁴

Thus the status of the prostitute was paradoxical: although she was principally for the use of men, she none the less constituted a potential challenge to male authority. Given all the negative and destructive implications of prostitution in Egypt, it is not surprising to find that the principal Greek word for prostitute, *pornê*, still bore some of its original implication of 'slave', its pejorative force would have been increased. An abrupt and censorious fourth-century CE letter (P. Grenf. I 53), written by a Christian woman called Artemis, relates the sexual activities of Sarapion's daughters, using the derogatory word *porneumata* or whoredoms:

If you want to know about the whoredoms of your daughters, don't ask me ... how they leaped out saying 'We want men!' and how Lucra was found making a whore of herself with her paramour. Your girls are angry because I have told you what has happened for your own good ... I'm not the bastard daughter of a slave.

With this remark Artemis seems to be comparing her own rectitude and status with the immoral behaviour of Sarapion's daughters. In an earlier papyrus letter (P. Oxy. III 528) whose overall import is unfortunately rather difficult to grasp, Serenus quotes his absent wife Isidora as having written to him saying, 'Colobus has made me into a whore'. It seems that Isidora left Serenus after some kind of contretemps with him about property, but found life with Colobus even less to her liking; but as so often with papyri, there is a textual difficulty here. With a minimal emendation the word interpreted as a proper name, *kolobos*, could become *kollybos*, a word for a small coin. The whole phrase would then mean something like 'twopence has

made me into a whore' –perhaps an idiom, since a *kollybos* was one of the proverbial prices for sex with a prostitute.²⁵

The majority of prostitutes would probably have been women. Male prostitutes must surely have existed in Egypt, as they did in other parts of the Roman world, but it is difficult to identify them as such, given the limitations of the evidence. Here again, one is faced with problems of terminology. Apart from meaning passive homosexual, *kinaidos* is the most usual Greek word to indicate males engaged in prostitution, particularly those taking the passive role, but a secondary meaning of the word is dancer or entertainer, drawing attention once again to the link perceived between dancers and easy sexual availability. The papyri occasionally describe men as *kinaidoi* but, given the other connotations of the word, it is impossible to take these mentions at face value. For instance, a list of tax-payers (P. Fouad 68) from Oxyrhynchus dating to around 181 CE mentions Hatres the *kinaidos* among a number of other men designated by profession. It is possible that he may have been a homosexual prostitute, but it is equally likely that *kinaidos* here is used in its other meaning of dancer or entertainer; another papyrus (P. Tebt. I 208) mentions payments to a *kinaidos mousikos* who had been hired as an entertainer for someone's birthday.²⁶ This is not to say that the *kinaidoi* hired as entertainers would be averse to turning a few tricks on the side. It does seem possible that some men worked in the 'sex industry' of Græco-Roman Egypt. An ostrakon (O. Edfou 171) from Edfu in Upper Egypt dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius seems to record a man paying a share of the local prostitution tax, but it is impossible to say whether he was actually working as a prostitute himself: maybe he was a pimp.²⁷

If easy sexual availability was one of the main criteria for categorising individuals as potential prostitutes, then dancers, castanet-players and flute-girls, who purveyed erotic entertainment, were certainly to be included in the category. Before looking at the Egyptian evidence, one must note that 'Horace, Juvenal and other authors of the imperial period considered entertainers on this level to be indistinguishable from prostitutes –a point of view repeatedly enunciated in the law codes.'²⁸ Other writers rank Egyptian entertainers with girls from Syria and Cadiz in terms of the lasciviousness of their dancing and ability to perform titillating songs: 'The voice, not the face, plays bawd: you should know the latest vaudeville numbers, the slinkiest hits from the Nile!'²⁹ By the fourth century, the collocation of prostitutes and entertainers had become so well-established as to have entered the discourse of Christian rhetoric. A turgid early Christian text (P. Oxy. V 840 35–41) found at Oxyrhynchus fulminates against prostitutes and flute-girls in the same

breath:

thou hast washed in those running waters wherein dogs and swine have been cast night and day, and hast cleansed the skin which harlots and flute-girls anoint and wash and wipe and beautify for the lust of men.

The neat chiasmic structure of the sentence places the harlots and flute-girls as a pair to be balanced with dogs and pigs, thus placing them on the same level of filth and contamination; and in fact the text goes on to call the women 'full of scorpions and every kind of wickedness'. Given all this, a discussion of the sexual status of entertainers in Græco-Roman Egypt must at least consider the possibility that they offered other services in addition to dancing.

There had been a long-standing awareness in Egypt of the eroticism of the dance. On the walls of New Kingdom tombs in the Theban necropolis, scantily-clad dancing girls appear as a regular element in iconographic schemes designed to ensure the sexual vitality and rebirth of the tomb owner. Women temple performers danced erotically before male gods as a means of channelling the potentially destructive force of their divine sexuality in a more creative way: men are never shown dancing vigorously. With Hellenisation, dance continued to be an important part of private festivities, and a number of dancers, singers and flute- and castanet-players of both sexes come up in the Greek papyri, usually in contracts for the hiring of these entertainers.³⁰ These are not the famous dancers who were important theatrical performers: these were usually men who were objects of popular adulation, sometimes being publicly honoured by election to the 'Performers' Guild of Victorious Crowned Artists under the Patronage of Dionysus' or feted with such civic distinctions as honorary citizenships and tax exemptions.³¹ The people who appear in the hiring contracts are mostly working on the lower echelons of the profession, usually as peripatetic performers based in the metropoleis who were hired to entertain at local festivals in the countryside. The contract is usually made with the male head of a troupe, the *pronoetês auletridôn* or 'supervisor of the flute-girls', who will supply female members of his troupe. In 237 CE Aurelius Theon from Arsinoë provided Aurelius Asclas of Bacchias 'with the dancer Tasais and one other woman for our festival in the aforementioned village for ten days from 13 Phaophi' (P. Grenf. II 67). Other contracts specify that the women are to dress up in their dance costumes and be adorned with jewellery to increase their sexual attractiveness.³²

It may seem judgemental to assume that Tasais and Isidora also engaged in selling themselves as well as dancing, especially since no contract with dancers or musicians actually specifies that the dancers

have to provide sexual services during their hire period. None the less, given the universally low sexual status and reputation of dancers in antiquity, their sexual availability might well have been a given. The dancers are usually hired to perform at the celebration of religious festivals, which are sometimes mentioned by name, and festivals were traditionally an opportunity for drunkenness and sexual licence. A *topos* of popular literature from Roman Egypt is that of the young person, male or female, who loses his or her virginity after being carried away with the excitement of a festival (see [Chapter 7](#)). There is a difference, of course, between fictional narratives of seduction and the activities of dancers and prostitutes at festivals, but they still underline the idea that festival time was the time for release, with drinking and dancing naturally followed by sexual activity. Presumably sexual transactions could have been arranged privately between the dancer and the festival-goer, which would leave no trace on the documentary record. One might draw analogies between the status of dancers in Roman Egypt and the status of masseurs in the modern sex industry. Their availability for sexual services is not specified, but is none the less well known to the potential client.

Perceptions of the sexual accessibility of female dancers and entertainers might also have been influenced by their status as itinerants,³³ and, according to contemporary medical beliefs about women's bodies, the strenuous physical exertion they were forced to perform in the course of their work would have put them further outside the pale of the controlled, reproductive *gynê*. Such exercise could have been seen as rendering women mannish and sterile, and thus potentially more available for unfettered sexual activity: 'strenuous exercise endangers a woman's health, since it desiccates her uterus, causing it to rise, attracted by moister organs in the upper regions of the body. Wombs dry out... when strenuous physical activity brings on desiccation.'³⁴ In Hippocratic medical terms, dancers would have been seen as taking far more exercise than was appropriate for their health, which would have the potentiality not only to dislodge their wombs but also stop, or certainly interrupt, their menstrual cycles. If this failed and such a woman did conceive, then the gyrations that she performed in the course of her work could still help to terminate the pregnancy. This idea is related in an anecdote from an embryological work of the Hippocratic corpus³⁵ which also throws some light on the regularity with which dancing-girls were also expected to provide sexual services. A female relative of the writer owned a valuable slave woman, whom she also employed as a dancer-cum-prostitute. It was important that this slave should not become pregnant and be unavailable for work, thus losing her value. The woman had evidently picked up some of the orally-transmitted

‘knowledge’ of prostitutes:

that when a woman is going to conceive, the seed remains inside her and does not fall out. She digested this information, and kept a watch. One day she noticed that the seed had not come out again. She told her mistress, and the story came to me. When I heard it, I told her to jump up and down, touching her buttocks with her heels at each leap. After she had done this no more than seven times, there was a noise and the seed fell out on the ground.³⁶

The Organisation of Prostitution

Brothels, Brothel-Keepers and Areas of Prostitution

If the literary sources are to be believed, the major Egyptian centres of prostitution were at Naucratis and Canopus in the Delta and at Elephantine in the south, and one also hears of brothels at less important towns such as Hypsele in the Thebaid;³⁷ but it is Alexandria that crops up repeatedly, along with Antioch and later Constantinople, as one of the principal hot-beds of prostitution in the Roman East. Alexandria was the work-place of several famous ‘harlot saints’ who repented of their wicked lives to go and live as anchorites. The Christian repentance literature about these reformed Alexandrian prostitutes goes into lip-smacking detail over their lascivious lives in the archetypal big bad city, over their gorgeously commodified bodies and their numerous wealthy and influential clients who ruined themselves for them. Their former luxuriousness is, of course, deliberately overstated to contrast with their subsequent state of virtuous self-denial.³⁸ Knowledge of organised prostitution in Alexandria is limited by the lack of papyri from the site, but it is probably safe to say that since it was the capital city, there must have been more prostitutes working there than anywhere else in Egypt.

I have already introduced the woman who worked in a brothel there as a ‘common prostitute’, and more shall be heard of her and one of her clients later. The trade was not confined to the brothels. As at Pompeii and other cities of the ancient world, prostitution in Alexandria was carried on around the city gates and the harbour areas, the *quartiers louches* where women would have had the best opportunities for soliciting sailors and travellers as they entered the city. The quarters around the Sun Gate in the eastern part of the city, and around the Moon Gate that gave onto the Eunostus harbour, were well-known centres of prostitution. There is even supposed to have been a sort of central register of prostitutes,³⁹ which might be

plausible when one considers that prostitution was taxed. If one is to believe Dio Chrysostom, in the second century CE it was virtually impossible to walk down one of the main streets of the city without being accosted by ‘bad women’ dressed to kill.⁴⁰

In Alexandria at least, women engaged in prostitution sometimes assumed sexy working names, *noms de guerre* that were more appropriate to their profession than their real ones. These names, just like the pseudonyms adopted by contemporary porn actresses, sought to objectify and commodify the women, or draw attention to particular physical attributes and erotic bodily foci. A cursory look at any contemporary advertisement for porn videos will yield actresses using such names as Cameo, Barbi Dahl, Ebony Ayes and Constance Money. In the same way, the repentant harlot-saint Pelagia was known to her clients in Alexandria as Margarito ‘Pearl’,⁴¹ a name replete with connotations of sexuality and commodity. The names of some actual Egyptian prostitutes known from the documents suggest the same kind of ideas. One of the prostitutes working the festival trade at Elephantine in 144 CE was called Aphrodite, but this was a common name in Egypt and it would be unwise to assume too much from it. Another woman who had worked in the same town three centuries earlier was known as Elaphion, ‘little doe.’⁴² Does, hinds and gazelles are cross-culturally associated with attractive young womanhood. A slave woman sold off by the brothel-keeper Pyrrhus in 265 CE was called Canthara, presumably a feminine derivative of the word *kantharos*; this might refer to the basic meaning of the word, ‘scarab beetle’ (which, apart from having fertility implications, was an ingredient of aphrodisiacs), or to a cognate word meaning ‘drinking-cups’, with all their associations of drunkenness and revelry. Either derivation would be a suitable name for a woman engaged in prostitution.

Virtually nothing factual is known about the lives of these women, but an idea of what they might have been like comes from an unlikely quarter –the nineteenth-century French novelist Anatole France. Although he prided himself on his extensive use of the ancient authorities, his novel *Thaïs* (1890) is utterly a product of its time and place, conjuring up a delirious fin-de-siècle mirage of fourth-century CE Alexandria. None the less, some episodes in the book still manage to evoke a very vivid (and probably perceptive) picture of low life in the wicked city. The teenage beauty Thaïs, later to become a whore and then a saint, starts on the slippery slope to prostitution in a seedy inn near the Moon Gate patronised by sailors, where

she became quite clever at pilfering obols that the sailors kept in their belts while she delighted them with ... squalid lyrics

of whose meaning she was innocent. They passed her from knee to knee in the room which smelled of fermented drink and resinous goatskin bags; then she would escape, her face sticky with beer and chafed by the rough-cheeked sailors.⁴³

Like the *popinae* and *cauponae* of Pompeii, inns, taverns and bars were probably regular venues for prostitutes in the Egyptian urban environment. Two Ptolemaic papyri suggest that there may have been some links between selling beer and selling sex. In a list of payments connected with the beer monopoly (P. Lugd. Bat. XX 63) eleven women appear: the only one with a specific profession was Taesis the *hetaira*; another woman, Aynchis, is probably the same woman whose daughter eloped with a vine-dresser. Her mother subsequently filed a petition against the girl for loss of earnings, the wording of which seems to imply that the girl was a prostitute.⁴⁴ As for the other classic locations for soliciting, the bath-houses, there appears to be little proof that they were used for prostitution in Egypt, as they sometimes were at Rome. This is not to say that they could not be a potential erotic venue. A magical spell (PGM CXXVII 1–12) gives the following recipe for a pick-up: ‘to get a certain lover at the baths: rub a tick from a dead dog on the loins.’ In his exhortation to the good Christian life, Clement of Alexandria includes a section on the proper use of bath-houses, inveighing against people who go there to make sexual assignments,⁴⁵ but he does not specifically mention prostitutes using them as a place for plying their trade.

Alexandrian prostitutes mostly seem to have been under the management of a single ‘whore-herder’ or *pornoboskos*. The term is derogatory, putting the prostitutes he controls on the same level as pigs or farm-animals (perhaps with an implication of the bodies of the women being for consumption); and it is, of course, equally derogatory to the *pornoboskos* himself. Dio Chrysostom gives some more information: they are called whore-herders because they are peripatetic, shepherding their women around the country to cash in on the lucrative festival trade:

Is it not more profitable and better with regard to his earnings that he alone should bear this shameful name ... whether supporting and training those kind of creatures in the city or taking them on the road and dragging them along to the Pylaia and all the other great festive gatherings?⁴⁶

A most interesting papyrus letter (PSI IV 406) of the third century BC documents the activities of two amateur pimps, Dionysius and Drimylus, who buy and sell a number of slave-women for prostitution at various places in Egypt, Palestine and Arabia. The term used for

them is *paidiskai*, little girls, indicating both their youth and their subordinate status. The text illustrates clearly the mobility of pimps and prostitutes and the places where the women might expect to pick up passing trade: ports and inns. One girl is bought in Egypt, equipped with suitable adornments, and eventually sold to a border guard who seems to have run an inn. Another woman was taken from Amman in Palestine and sold at the port of Ptolemaïs. They also bought and sold three other women, ‘profiting splendidly’ from their activities. In other documents, the Egyptian brothel-keepers and pimps are all men: the old procuress, a stock character from Hellenistic comic writing, appears nowhere in the documentary papyri.

Contemporaneous evidence from elsewhere in Egypt is not so forthcoming about extensive street prostitution, which may have been confined to the big cities, and suggests rather that many prostitutes worked in municipal brothels. These were run by private individuals on a concession obtained by public bidding and seem to have been taxed as a single unit on a monthly basis.⁴⁷ In the Roman period, the tax on brothels fell into the ‘hieratic’ class, which seems to imply that they were originally collected by or for the benefit of temples or priests. This accords with a decree (P. Tebt. I 6)⁴⁸ of Ptolemy VIII dating from 140/139 BCE which confirms a series of monopolies granted to an unknown temple, probably in the Fayyum. Included among these monopolies is the establishment of *ta aphrodisia*, a phrase often thought to mean brothels. The Roman tax on brothels in Egypt is unique in that it is the only one of the trade taxes that was collected by the month, though the purpose of this is unclear, perhaps an indication of the ‘fly-by-night’ nature of the operation? The fisc would no doubt wish to take measures to get what it was owed, if the *pornoboskoi* were often transporting their girls around the country in search of better trade. The physical appearance of the brothels themselves may not have differed much from that of ordinary houses. A sixth-century CE lease (P. Lond. V 1877)⁴⁹ of what seems to be a brothel at Hermopolis is couched in exactly the same standard terminology that is found in contemporary leases of house property, which may in itself suggest that the brothel was structurally indistinguishable from a private house. At any rate, the text makes no mention of particular features that seem to have been characteristic of ancient brothels, such as a multiplicity of small cubicles for entertaining clients; it merely refers to the building’s external courtyard and well. It is possible that some appropriately erotic emblem, such as a phallus or an image of the god Bes, was displayed outside the house to make its function unambiguous, and that the internal space was divided up appropriately.

The evidence for brothels in or associated with temple precincts is,

to say the least, equivocal. At Oxyrhynchus there was a brothel in the market associated with the temple of Sarapis.⁵⁰ The decree of Ptolemy VIII mentioned above does not imply that the brothels were actually in the temple enclosures, only that the temple had a monopoly on the money from brothels in some defined area that belonged to it. In fact, no conclusive archaeological evidence for brothel areas in temples has ever been found. In the course of excavations during the 1905–6 season at Saqqara, east of the Teti pyramid and within the enclosure of the Anubeum, J. E. Quibell cleared some mud-brick rooms whose walls were decorated with three-dimensional polychrome figures of the fertility god Bes, flanked by female worshippers whose hands caress his protuberant belly. These rooms, which were probably built in the mid-second century BCE, came to be known as ‘Bes-chambers’. Apart from their wall decorations, a cache of ‘erotic’ figurines was also found in the rooms. This group of material was unfortunately never published in the site report and its location is now lost, but it seems to have consisted of phallic statuettes of Bes and other anthropomorphic figures, and the so-called *symplegmata* groups of interlocked couples making love⁵¹ (see Plate 8). The concentration of all this phallic material in association with Bes has led some writers to follow Quibell’s idea that ‘as to the use of this group of chambers, the most obvious explanation is that they were *aphrodisia*,’⁵² It has been suggested that these rooms may have been used for prostitution, possibly in association with the cult of Astarte⁵³. Cultic prostitution or *hierodouleia* was not an Egyptian tradition, though it might have gone on at such places as the precinct of the foreign deity Astarte at Saqqara. However, textual references to specifically Egyptian cultic prostitutes are highly ambiguous. In the story quoted above, Setne meets the seductive Tabubu in the forecourt of the temple of Ptah at Memphis, but the forecourt was the most accessible part of the temple and the text gives no indication that she went there specifically to solicit.⁵⁴ Strabo says that in honour of Zeus-Amun the priests at the Memnonium in Thebes used to ‘consecrate a maiden of the greatest comeliness and most exalted family, the kind of girl that the Greeks call “concubines.” She prostitutes herself and goes with whomever she pleases,’ apparently until her menarche begins. After that, ‘she is given in marriage to a man; but before she is given away, a mourning ritual is held for her, after her days of prostitution.’⁵⁵ It has been convincingly argued that the Demotic so-called ‘self-dedication contracts’, which have been cited as evidence for cultic prostitution in Ptolemaic temples, are actually a kind of insurance policy against illness.⁵⁶ In the absence of other evidence, one should probably not take Strabo too literally. As for the ‘Bes chambers’ at Saqqara, the ‘erotic’ figurines deposited there may be the *ex votos* of a fertility cult,

or it is even possible that the rooms were used for childbirth. Apart from his sex/fertility associations, Bes is often a tutelary deity of pregnant women, and the layout and decoration of the Saqqara 'Bes chambers' recall the rooms in New Kingdom houses at Deir el-Medina, which may have been used for the postnatal purification of the mother.⁵⁷

There are no instances in the papyri from Lower Egypt and the Fayyum of prostitutes working independently outside brothels, though it is quite possible that they did do so. Although the evidence is too limited to make generalisations, a small group of second-century CE ostraca from Upper Egypt suggests a rather different organisation of the prostitution trade there. In this part of Egypt, women working as prostitutes could be directly taxed in order to be able to ply their trade for periods of time varying from a single day to an entire year. The fact that all this evidence comes from the general area of Upper Egypt may be significant, but perhaps more interesting are the specific towns from where these texts originated. One ostrakon comes from the Hermonthite nome, the site of the temples of the Buchis bull cult, and the others come from Elephantine, the great cult centre of the ram-headed creator-god Khnum. Both of these places were major foci for pilgrimage and tourism, where prostitution could have been lucrative, particularly at festival times; but they were also religious sites where a theriomorphic fertility god was the local deity. One wonders whether the sexual potency of the *deus loci* may have had some effect on the sexual life of festival-goers. One is reminded of the story in Herodotus II 46 about the sacred goat of the god Min at Mendes having intercourse with women:

The Mendesians hold all goats in veneration, especially the males, whose keepers enjoy special privileges. One of them is held in particular reverence, and when he dies the whole province goes into mourning. Mendes is the Egyptian equivalent for the god Pan and also the name for a goat. In the province not long ago the goat had intercourse with a woman in full view of everybody.

Were men attending these festivals expected to imitate in some way the sexual potency of the local cult animals? (See [Figure 9](#).)



Figure 9 Mould for an object showing a goat having sex with a woman. (After Schwartz 1965)

Whatever the psychological truth, the taxation of women working as prostitutes in these important religious centres may be a purely local response to capitalise on the amount of revenue that could be raised from the tourist industry in these places, and was not general in the rest of Egypt. The ostraca from Hermonthis (modern Armant) and Elephantine in the south of the country take the form either of tax receipts, acknowledging that the woman had paid her full fiscal obligation for a year's tax,⁵⁸ or permissions to ply the prostitute's trade on a single day.⁵⁹

Plenis the elder and his fellow collectors of the prostitution tax for the Hermonthite nome, acting through the agency of Carouris, greetings to Artemidora whose mother is Samb(). I have received 4 drachmas for prostitution tax of the tenth year. Year 10 of Aurelius Antoninus the lord, Pachon 8 [= 3 May 170]. (O. Cairo GPW 60)

Pelaïas and Socraton, the collectors of the prostitution tax,

greetings to Thinabdella. We authorise you to sleep with whomever you wish here on the day written below. Year 14, Phaophi 10 [= 7 October 111]. (O. Wilck. 1157)⁶⁰

These receipts are formulaic documents that give no information beyond the fact that the woman had discharged her tax dues, leaving the imagination to run riot on the interesting details of where she picked up her clients, how she made herself recognisable to them, how much she charged and where she took them for sex. The three texts allowing the women to 'sleep with whomever she wishes' on a particular day are all from Elephantine, and may imply that the women are not full-time professionals employed in the municipal brothels, but single operators taking advantage of some particular influx of people into the town to make some money. Alternatively, the women could be full-time prostitutes who were allowed to work outside their usual house on particular days. The dates on which the receipts were issued suggest strongly that there was a correlation with the festivals of the local temples. For instance, a permission (SB IV 7399) allowing the appropriately-named Aphrodite to sleep with whomever she wanted, was written at Elephantine on 14 Hathyr 144, or 10 November in the Julian calendar. This date coincides with a four-day festival of Isis and Osiris which is attested as far back as the New Kingdom and is frequently mentioned in classical sources, including Plutarch.⁶¹ The festival connection is further corroborated by four graffiti from the Philae and Dodescachcoenus areas written in the same month of Hathyr, which bear witness to the visiting of the temples there by pilgrims. Similarly, the receipt for a year's prostitution tax from Armant, quoted above, was written on 8 Pachon. The prostitute Artemidora was perhaps getting ready for an influx of pilgrims coming to the shrine of the Buchis bull at Armant for the great festival of Montu, which started on 10 Pachon.⁶² It may be significant that Artemidora's receipt was issued by an agent of the tax collector for the entire nome or province.

To understand the importance of this, a closer look at the operations of the local cult might be informative. The Buchis bull was peripatetic, and seems to have moved around between Armant, Medamud, Qus and Tod, the four towns in the area where he was considered to have a hypostasis. Pilgrims followed the barge carrying the divine bull from town to town. It is possible that Artemidora herself was a peripatetic operator who, with the pilgrims, followed the cult circuit of the Buchis barge, hoping to pick up trade *en route*. Unlike the Elephantine receipts, her permission did not limit her to practising prostitution in one place, so perhaps one is to envisage her travelling between the four main Buchis shrines in the region, and carrying with her as proof

of her discharged tax obligations her receipt, conveniently written on a small potsherd that was so much more durable than a piece of papyrus. Ostraca are often used in contexts where papyrus is inappropriate: as receipts for clothes left in the baths, or as temporary 'passports' for women travelling in military zones in the Eastern Desert.⁶³ The fact that the receipt was made out to the woman herself rather than to her *pornoboskos* may suggest that she may have been working individually rather than attached to a brothel or controlled by a pimp.

In a recent article, a passage of Suetonius was interpreted to suggest that the Emperor Gaius' introduction of a new system of taxing prostitutes was based on an Egyptian antecedent for the tax.⁶⁴ In fact, this was manifestly unlikely. There is no firm evidence for taxing prostitutes in Egypt prior to the reign of Trajan, and concessions for collecting taxes were farmed out to individuals as one of the innovations to the taxation system brought about by Augustus, not on the basis of a Ptolemaic precedent.⁶⁵ It is not known how the taxation rates for prostitutes were worked out, whether by a notional proportion of the money paid by each client, or on analogy with other trade taxes. One does wonder whether the tax rate would have taken into account the relative earning capacities of different prostitutes, with older women perhaps earning less than younger ones or those who offered some kind of 'special service'. Unfortunately the Egyptian evidence is silent on this point, though at Palmyra across the Eastern Desert a tariff of 137 CE proposes to tax prostitutes a denarius a month if that is what they can earn per client, a lesser amount if they earn less. What was certainly not implicit in the taxation was any element of moral punishment of the 'vice' of prostitution, which nineteenth century commentators were anxious to see: if anything, the fact of taxation indicates that there was nothing illicit about prostitution. Prostitutes were traders like any others, and like everybody else had to discharge their obligations to the fisc.

The question of the direct taxation of individual women raises another question: how were prostitutes recognisable, both to the taxman as well as to their potential clients? Shoes and feet seem to have been a strong erotic focus in Egypt, and could thus be exploited by ornamentation to drum up trade. Clement of Alexandria says that some 'women of easy virtue' had special come-on messages incorporated into the nails on the soles of their sandals, thus 'stamping the lustfulness of their own feelings upon the earth'.⁶⁶ Actual examples of such shoe soles have survived, with legends like 'follow me' (*akolouthe*).⁶⁷ And the Stoic writer Sextus Empiricus suggests that the ankle chain may have considerable antiquity as a badge of sexual availability:

Among us, prostitution is a shameful and disgraceful thing, but with many of the Egyptians it is highly esteemed; at any rate, women who have had the greatest number of lovers wear an ornamental ankle ring as a token of their exalted position.⁶⁸

Women may have shown their availability by displaying themselves at their windows in appropriately alluring costumes, a system which still persists in some red-light areas, or by soliciting outside the brothel door. Anthia, the heroine of a romance by Xenophon of Ephesus, is forced to parade in this way when she is sold into slavery and prostitution. At Rome, prostitutes were supposed to wear a special 'working costume';⁶⁹ and indeed stipulations that prostitutes wear some kind of visible sign have been noted in many societies, often in conjunction with other sumptuary legislation that serves to categorise people according to social status.⁷⁰ Also informative here is a famous inscription⁷¹ raised in 90 CE at the toll-house of the Egyptian town of Coptus. This was a major centre for Red Sea trade leaving and entering the Nile Valley via the desert road, and the inscription gives the various rates of harbour passage tax that were levied on different classes of people and animals leaving for the Red Sea ports:

For a skipper in the Red Sea trade, 8 drachmas; for a guard, 10 drachmas; for a sailor, 5 drachmas; for an artisan, 8 drachmas; for prostitutes, 108 drachmas; for sailors' women, 20 drachmas; for soldiers' women, 20 drachmas; for a camel-permit, 1 obol... for a donkey, 2 obols.

Speculation on the practical enforcement of these rules has flourished since this tariff was first published in 1894. Donkeys and camels are easy enough to differentiate, but how could prostitutes, soldier's women or sailor's women be told apart other than by asking them, and if that was the case, why did they not lie and avoid the large toll? Maybe prostitutes did wear some kind of immediately recognisable clothing. Petrie thought that the women must have been physically differentiable, presumably by skin colour, for he speculated that 'Indians were apparently much admired; for at Koptos, the port of the Indian trade, there was a very heavy duty on women coming in from the Red Sea, showing that there was a great demand for them.'⁷² Others have interpreted the steep duty as an attempt by a morally-minded fisc to tax prostitution out of existence, or more recently as a reflection of how much money the women could make in an area where the men who 'policed the lonely desert routes would be starved for female company'.⁷³ The sum of 108 drachmas was very substantial, and is unlikely to have been the fee per woman, so this

may be a group of itinerant prostitutes under the control of their *pornoboskos*, hoping to cash in on the personnel of the desert garrisons. One is also reminded of the prostitution activities of Dionysius and Drimylus. There does, however, seem to be a sub-text to the Coptus tariff. Was it intended to be fully enforceable? It is certainly not difficult to think of ways of avoiding its impositions with a little subterfuge. Perhaps it should be seen as implying a symbolic demarcation of various social groups in what was, after all, a rigidly stratified and status-conscious society where people were supposed to know their place. If prostitutes were seen as a potential threat, it would be necessary to contain them within such categories.

Prostitutes and Clients

Soldiers and other military personnel are, of course, supposed to be the patrons of prostitutes *par excellence*, and there is no doubt that this was true in Roman Egypt. The women travelling along the desert routes were probably hoping to make money from such men. Other documentary evidence for the association of soldiers with prostitutes is lacking from Egypt: one would not expect it to appear in military archives or letters home. There is no reason to suppose that women did not go out to the remote Egyptian desert forts to sell sex, though the women travelling to the best documented of these, Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert between Qift (ancient Coptus) and Qena, mostly seem to be with men or children rather than alone or with other women. Across the desert at Dura Europus in Syria, however, a number of women from several different towns went to entertain the men of the garrison in 256 CE. Their presence is recorded in a series of graffiti which list the names of the women, along with some of their derogatory sexual nicknames: 'Camathe the tarted-up, Thicine the insatiable, Thennis the old whore.'⁷⁴ These soubriquets show that violence against women was not confined to the physical. When they left camp on furlough, soldiers would undoubtedly have used urban prostitutes. When the proselytiser Abraham goes to Alexandria to try to convert the prostitute Thaïs from her life of vice, he disguises himself as a soldier in order to be able to enter the brothel inconspicuously to converse with her.⁷⁵

The clientele of prostitutes in Roman Egypt was not limited to soldiers, sailors, wayfarers and other transients. They would also have been used by the young, unmarried men, the losers in a competitive marriage market, who migrated to the cities—at least if the men could afford them.⁷⁶ As the Christian writers such as Dio and Clement suggest, prostitution was at the heart of the social structure of the cities, particularly Alexandria, and women working there were

regularly patronised by men from all sectors of the population. Just like modern sex industry workers, prostitutes were subject to the perennial risk of physical violence from their punters. Herodas' second mime deals in part with a Tyrian slave-prostitute called Myrtale. She has been roughed up by a client, and her pimp is demanding reparation from the man whom he claims attacked the girl. However, the best documented case of violence against prostitutes in the papyri is that of an Alexandrian senator, Diodemus, and the 'common prostitute' mentioned earlier; her name was once given, but has been lost in a damaged part of the text. The sorry story of their involvement is narrated in a fragmentary parchment book (BGU IV 1024) now in Berlin. This most interesting text is worth considering in some detail, because it sheds considerable light on perceptions of the prostitute, on her relationship with her client, and on male violence against women in a world where sexual attitudes are changing.

The text was found at Hermopolis in Middle Egypt and copied in the fourth century CE, at a time of growing Christianisation. Apart from being badly damaged and inadequately published, the nature and function of this text as a whole pose considerable problems.⁷⁷ The case of Diodemus and the prostitute is in fact the seventh in a collection of stories narrated in a quasi-legal manner. Three of the others deal with women being murdered by men with whom they are having various kinds of sexual relationships. There is one case of the murder of an adulterous wife, and one of an unmarried woman who has a regular lover. Of the other three, one deals with incest, another with the exhumation of a body, and the third is too broken up to be intelligible. It is impossible to guess at the reasons for this compilation, but the murder narratives are undoubtedly contrived and contain many stock elements from fiction, and I wonder whether in fact this section of the text is a sort of prototype 'true crime' book, mixing the conventions of the ancient novel with pseudo-factual reportage. The Diodemus case is the longest and most detailed of the criminal stories. Diodemus was one of the Alexandrian prostitute's regular clients, and he was accustomed to visit her and 'enjoy her company in the evening hours'. Diodemus murdered the woman – there is no mention of how or why – and was subsequently arrested and jailed, perhaps on the orders of the praefect of Egypt himself. The next day, some of Diodemus' fellow senators petitioned that he be released and the case against him dismissed. Although the magistrate (or praefect) Zephyrius seems to have thought the petition unreasonable, he released Diodemus, only to have him arrested again and brought up for trial. Diodemus admits to the murder. Then the victim's mother, Theodora, is brought into court, and demands that the murderer be forced to make a contribution to her subsistence. She

tells the court:

For this reason I handed my daughter over to the brothel-keeper –that I myself might have food. Therefore since I have been deprived of my support by my daughters death, I petition that I be given a moderate little woman's portion for my sustenance.

Theodora's petition is followed by Zephyrius' summing up, expressed in high style and full of rhetorical flourishes:

Diodemus, you have basely killed a woman who reproached her fate amongst men, because she spent her life in an ignoble manner and eventually sold [...] and I have taken pity on this unfortunate woman, because when she was alive she was offered like a corpse to the men who wished to have her. The wretchedness of her fate bore down on her so greatly that she sold her body to a shameful rank, dishonouring her own reputation, instead coming upon a reputation as a prostitute, so full of tribulations, so that she might live [...]

He goes on to say that Diodemus had dishonoured the senatorial order to which he belonged, and because of this is to be executed as a murderer. In spite of betraying his social group by committing the murder, Diodemus' decurial status still dictates that he be executed by decapitation, thus saving him from the humiliating execution by crucifixion or exposure reserved for humbler individuals. Theodora is then to inherit one-tenth of Diodemus' estate, both because of legal precedent and because Zephyrius says he felt 'a sense of clemency joins in inspiring the power of the laws'.

Zephyrius' decision contains two points of particular interest which seem to highlight ideas about the shifting role of prostitutes in a world which is becoming gradually Christian. Firstly, there is Zephyrius' seeming compassion towards Theodora and her daughter as victims of poverty, who are to be pitied and aided in their helplessness, which has come about through no fault of their own. This is very different from images of prostitutes presented earlier, who appear as having actively chosen their way of life and are responsible for their own destructive behaviour. Secondly, there is Zephyrius' compassion of the living body of the prostitute with dead meat. It perhaps implies the womans passivity and lack of feeling towards the sexual act, that Zephyrius imagined her looking at a metaphorical watch as Diodemus made love to her: but the stereotypical prostitute was full of lust. One might read an element of male fantasy into the simile, with the harlot as a purchasable commodity, the passive human property of whoever

pays for her. And perhaps there is also the implication of pollution – the woman's body is not an instrument of pleasure but an instrument of contagion. This kind of negative imagery for the body of the prostitute almost seems to anticipate the way that women victims of sex crimes today are presented as 'resigned female bodies at the beck and call of the bourgeois body',⁷⁸ especially if they happen to be prostitutes. But in a world of nascent Christianity, the human body has become a battleground for the contestation of morality: it is imbued with Christian notions of goodness and badness, and what is done with the physical body provides a parallel for the state of the incorporeal soul. Thus texts like the Hermopolis papyrus seem to point to a fundamental shift from externalised to internalised morality expressed through the status of the physical body. In such a discourse, the body of the prostitute has a useful and obvious function as an opposite to the body of the virtuous woman.

Also interesting is the inclusion of the victim's mother, Theodora, and her relationship with her daughter. As James Keenan points out in his discussion of BGU IV 1024, Theodora is 'introduced in an almost comic stereotype as penniless old hag'⁷⁹ who has given her daughter up to prostitution because of want. This is a regular theme in Greek fiction about prostitutes. In Lucian's *Dialogues of the Prostitutes* 6, for instance, the widow Crobyle attempts unsuccessfully to support herself and her daughter Corinna by weaving, and is forced to send Corinna out onto the streets. In the ensuing conversation, Crobyle shows that she knows the prostitution business well, the implication being that she is a former prostitute herself. Theodora and Crobyle are comparable in other ways. Both are alone, with no male relatives, and are economically dependent on their daughters' earnings in the 'family business'. Prostitutes are usually depicted as having only female relatives, if they have any at all, in the ancient sources.⁸⁰ This has a striking parallel in some of the Egyptian documentary texts, where women who are designated as prostitutes are never given patronyms, and only occasionally matromyms.⁸¹ Thus the character of Theodora could have reminded contemporary readers of the papyrus with many familiar notions about prostitutes, their lives and familial situations.

The codex preserving the case of Diodemus and the Alexandrian woman is a reminder that in some respects, the daily lives of prostitutes in Græco-Roman Egypt and the lives of contemporary sex workers have changed comparatively little. Fear of sexual violence is ever-present for prostitutes, especially women, and this is unsurprising since the killing of women is an endemic (and, some would argue, fundamental) component of patriarchy. 'A brothel is a good place to learn misogyny,' said Angela Carter, and the senator Diodemus seems to have learned his lesson well. The documents from Egypt suggest

that the parallels between ancient and modern also extended into other areas of prostitutes' lives. Yet the Diodemus case comes at a crucial moment in the history of Egyptian prostitution, and articulates that while the external forms of prostitutes' lives may not have changed much, their symbolic value was changing to fit in with new ideologies.

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- 1 Athanasius, *Against the Pagans* 25 (= PG XXV 49 D).
 - 2 Herodas I 26–35, excerpted.
 - 3 Dover (1978) 21.
 - 4 Leontsini (1989) 25–6.
 - 5 Peremans and Van't Dack (1968) 41–5.
 - 6 Pomeroy (1984) 51–55.
 - 7 For discussion of this term, see Herter (i960) 94 n. 459.
 - 8 E.g. Senpsenmonthis who paid her prostitution tax on 14 July 112 (WO 504); her name honours Montu, the bull-god of Armant near Thebes.
 - 9 Ward (1987) 45.
 - 10 Herodotus II 134–6 and II 160.
 - 11 Heliodorus II 25. This passage is remarkably close to the Tabubu episode in the story of Setne, translated below. Just like Tabubu, Heliodorus' Rhodopis is a sexual huntress, who goes to find her prey (the priest Calasiris) in a temple; but the main theme in Heliodorus is the religious impiety of Calasiris' eventual submission to Rhodopis, which is not really present in the Demotic. Ian Rutherford of Harvard University and I intend to explore the parallels between Tabubu and Rhodopis further.
 - 12 P. British Museum 10508.6.12 and 22.6: text in Glanville (i955) = Lichtheim (1980) 161–80.
 - 13 Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse to the Alexandrians* 32. For other ways in which prostitutes exhibited themselves, see Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 11.71 (lurking in the doorways of houses, excessive make-up, and special come-hither gestures).
 - 14 Arnold in Blacking (1977) 179–97.
 - 15 Propertius II 23.13–24: translation courtesy of Peter Davidson.
 - 16 Hanson in Halperin *et al* (1990) 309 and nn. 1–6.
 - 17 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXVIII 70.
 - 18 Philaenis has spawned an enormous bibliography. See e.g. Whitehorne in Capasso *et al.* (1990); Parker in Richlin (1992); King in Porter and Teich (1994), all with bibliographies of earlier work on her.
 - 19 The text used here adopts the improved readings over Lobel's first edition (P. Oxy XXXIX 2891) suggested by Whitehorne in Capasso *et al.* (1990) 529–30.
 - 20 King in Porter and Teich (1994) 33.
 - 21 P. Cairo Dem. 30646, translated from the text in Griffith (1900) = Lichtheim (1980) 127–38. For Tabubu, see footnote 11 above.
 - 22 I have adopted T. G. Wilfong's ingenious suggestion that the unknown Demotic word which describes the state of Setne's penis, *shy3*, is related to the Coptic word for 'limp' or 'halt' rather than the word for 'flame', as is usually assumed.
 - 23 Artemidorus I 78.
 - 24 Ward (1987) 63 (Latin translation of the Greek 'life').
 - 25 See Herter (i960) 81 and n. 175.
 - 26 A *kinaidos* is accused of raping a woman in P. Enteux. 26 = Sel. Pap. II 268.

- 27 The interpretation of this text is problematic: see Bagnall (1991) 6. For another possible male sex industry worker, see the discussion of Zenobius the *malakos* in the next chapter.
- 28 Evans (1991) 13 3 and n. 120 with references, to which I would add Juvenal XI 162 ff; Martial V 78.22ff and XIV 203ff.
- 29 Ovid, *The Art of Love* III 316–18, trans. Peter Green.
- 30 The relevant papyri are listed and tabulated in Westermann (1924) 141.
- 31 For references, see Lewis (1985) 104.
- 32 E.g. SB V 7557, translated in [Chapter 7](#).
- 33 Herter (1960) 99.
- 34 Hanson in Halperin *et al.* (1990) 317–18.
- 35 Hippocratic Corpus XIII. 1–2, LV 8–18.
- 36 Non-medical authors also hint at how the barrenness of female dancers places them outside the respectable status of women, particularly those with the *ius trium liberorum*. Ammianus Marcellinus (*Histories* XIV 6) says that ‘women who were old enough to be the mothers of three children preferred to remain single in order to turn and twist with practised foot upon the dancing floor.’
- 37 For references, see Herter (1960) 71 and n. 21, 72 and n. 47.
- 38 See Ward (1987) 44 (on St Mary of Egypt) and 76–83 (on St Thais).
- 39 Leontsini (1989) 65: this recalls Tacitus, *Annals* II 85, which mentions a similar list drawn up by the aediles.
- 40 Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse to the Alexandrians* 32. For the location of centres of prostitution in the cities of the ancient world, see Herter (1960) 285 and notes *ad loc.*
- 41 Ward (1987) 63. For Margarito as a prostitute name see Leontsini (1989) 50–1.
- 42 She occurs in P. Eleph. 3 and 4, and is discussed by Pomeroy (1984) 143 and 146.
- 43 France (1890) [Chapter 2](#).
- 44 See [Chapter 1](#), on P. Lond. VII 1976.
- 45 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 5. 31–3.
- 46 Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse to the Alexandrians* 61.5.
- 47 Rea (1982) 197.
- 48 For discussion see McGinn (1989) 101 n. 38.
- 49 The word used here to designate brothel, *maulistêrion*, is badly damaged in the text as well as being unattested elsewhere (see Leontsini (1989) 57–8), so it is possible that some other building was being leased.
- 50 Rea (1982) 197.
- 51 See Martin (1987) 71 and n. 3.
- 52 Quibell (1907) 14.
- 53 For references, see Thompson (1988) 26 n. 94.
- 54 P. Cairo Dem. 30646 = Lichtheim (1980) 133.
- 55 Strabo XVII 1.46.
- 56 Clarysse in Johnson (1992) 53.
- 57 See Kemp (1989) 304 and nn. 64–6 for references.
- 58 E.g. O. Wilck. 83; O. Cairo GPW 60, translated below.
- 59 E.g. SB IV 7399, SB VI 9545 n. 33; O. Wilck. 1157, translated below.
- 60 Translated using the improved text of Plaumann (1920) 220 n.i.
- 61 For references, see Foertmeyer (1989) 216–17.
- 62 Mond and Myers (1934) 12.
- 63 E.g. O. Claud. 51, 58, 79.
- 64 Suetonius, *Gaius* 40, discussed by McGinn (1989) 100.
- 65 Bagnall (1991) 8–9.
- 66 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* II 11.116.
- 67 For references, see Winkler (1990) 109 and n. 147.

- 68 Sextus Empiricius, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III 201.
- 69 See e.g. Horace, *Satires* I 2.62ff; Ovid, *Fasti* IV 134, *Art of Love*, I 31, *Utters from the Black Sea* III 3.49–52; Juvenal II 69–70. It usually seems to have been a short or see-through garment.
- 70 See, for example, the badges that served to distinguish prostitutes in medieval France discussed by Rossiaud (1988), 8 n. 10, 57, 64.
- 71 OGIS 674 = IGRR I 1183 = IG Portes 67.
- 72 Petrie (1911) 14.
- 73 Lewis (1985) 145.
- 74 Welles (1944) 203. It is not absolutely certain that these are nicknames applied the women themselves; they may merely indicate the stock female roles that the women played in dramatic performances.
- 75 Ward (1987) 87.
- 76 On the migration of young men to the cities and its effects on marriage, see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 120–1, 160–9: they estimate that nearly 10 per cent of village males between the ages of 15 and 24 would have gone to the metropoleis.
- 77 The main problems are what relationship the ‘legal’ cases bear to the preceding *varia* in the text, and whether the murder narratives are documentary records of legal hearings. For analysis, see Keenan (1989) 15–23; Bagnall (1993) 197–8 and n. 87. The discussion of BGU IV 1024 here has greatly benefitted from the perceptive comments of Despina Christodoulou, of St John’s College, Cambridge.
- 78 Walkowitz (1992) 199.
- 79 Keenan (1989) 19.
- 80 See e.g. Lucian, *Dialogues of the Prostitutes*, *passim*; Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* XIII, *passim*.
- 81 See, for instance, the prostitution tax receipts in footnotes 58–9 above.

Homosexuality

Male Homosexuality

At Oxyrhynchus sometime in the first century CE, two men called Apion and Epimachus procured a little slip of papyrus only ten centimetres square and wrote, in very bad Greek, a curious letter to a third man, Epaphroditus. Presumably they knew him quite well, because Epimachus used the familiar short form of his name, Epimas, in the greeting. They peppered their letter with the phraseology of an official edict, giving a flavour of satire to their words, but also an air of portentousness and command. In the margin, they added a rough drawing, which they labelled (see Plate 9). Then they blotted it, folded it up into a small packet and addressed it: ‘deliver to the best-beloved Epaphroditus.’ One can only guess at the reaction of Epaphroditus when he opened the letter and read (or had read to him) the following proposition:

Apion and Epimas proclaim to their best-beloved Epaphroditus that if you allow us to bugger (*pugizein*) you it will go well for you, and we will not thrash you any longer if you allow us to bugger you. Farewell.

After reading this maybe Epaphroditus glanced at the cartoon in the margin – and then looked again. It is easy to imagine him turning the letter round in an effort to make it out. The original editor of this text wrote in his marvellously discreet introduction that ‘an equally primitive drawing in the margin clarifies (without real necessity) their intentions’. In fact, the drawing seems to contain a deliberate ambiguity, which the label reflects. The upper word reads *psôle*, ‘hard-on’, and the lower two words *kai phikis*, ‘and arse’. There are several ways of interpreting this. Maybe the drawing is supposed to represent both these foci of male homosexual desire at once. If one examines the drawing closely, it would be difficult to say whether one is looking at the exposed glans of an erect penis with an exaggerated meatus seen from above, or a pair of schematised buttocks with an exaggerated anus. Alternatively, a more spatial reading is possible. The words

‘hard-on and arse’ taken in conjunction with the drawing in between them, may be an attempt to represent Epimachus’ and Apion’s fantasy of taking Epaphroditus orally and rectally, of giving him (in current gay parlance) ‘a pint at both ends’.

Why Apion and Epimachus decided to write down their desire for Epaphroditus in this way is puzzling, but for Epaphroditus’ sake, I hope that their sexual technique was better than their Greek. On the surface their letter would seem to be little more than a piece of more-or-less playful fantasising, on a level with the sexual graffiti on the wall of a public lavatory. Other homosexual graffiti from elsewhere in the Roman world play around with image and text in a similar way to the letter from Oxyrhynchus. ‘Here I fucked my sea-going chum up the mouth and arse’ wrote a man on the wall of a building thought to be a male brothel at Ostia, emphasising what he had done with the man by drawing a puckered anus in the u of ‘fucked’ (Latin *futut*). Then, as now, a *pas de trois* was a regular male homosexual fantasy. Another graffito scrawled on the walls of the same building in Ostia even records a threesome with another man called Epaphroditus.¹ It is possible that the Epaphroditus from Oxyrhynchus was a prostitute; it is also possible that the letter is intended somehow to pejure him, in the same way that graffiti say ‘so-and-so is gay’ with an intent to hurt. However, I believe that this letter is an expression of private desire, and that if it is considered in more detail, this ephemeral wish caught on papyrus speaks very eloquently about some aspects of the construction and practice of male homosexuality in Græco-Roman Egypt.

One of the most illuminating features about the papyrus is the name of the recipient, Epaphroditus (‘charming’), which is almost invariably a slave name in Egypt.² The likelihood is that Epaphroditus was, or had been, a slave, and this is important for decoding the ancient sexual protocols underlying this letter.³ In the ancient world, sanctionable homosexual acts were usually based on inequity: you are not supposed to desire somebody of the same age and status category as yourself. Therefore younger men and slaves are fair game, particularly your own slaves, who are your passive human property. This disparity of power is acted out in the sexual roles played. Within such a system, ‘real’ men are defined as impenetrable penetrators, and therefore the only role suitable for an adult male is to be active: to be the passive partner would be womanish and inferior. Free men sacrifice their ‘real’ man status if they submit to penetration, for instance if they prostitute themselves. It seems to me that the sexual scenario conjured up by the letter and the drawing fits this model of relationships well. Epimachus and Apion seek to dominate sexually the socially subordinate Epaphroditus by penetrating him, whether

singly or both at the same time. Their power over him is emphasised by the juxtaposition of beating and buggery. Beating is almost an analogue to penetration, because it is invasive and therefore demeaning, and thus it also enforces the distinction between slave and free. The original editor of the papyrus assigned it the title of an 'indecent proposal', but in fact the letter contains little in the way of a proposition, which implies some element of consent. Although Apion and Epimachus may have phrased their sexual needs jocularly, their desire for Epaphroditus is not a proposal between equals for mutual pleasure, but a demand for the use of a subject body backed up by the threat of violence.

However, it would be misleading to give too reductive an analysis of Apion and Epimachus' letter. The interpretation of classical and ancient ideas about male homosexuality has been one of the main battlegrounds in the wider discussion of sexuality in antiquity. It is a crucial focus in the debate between scholars using constructionist or 'nominalist' ideas about sexuality, many of them following Foucault's model of constructed categories, and the scholars termed 'essentialists,' who argue that, to some extent, an inherent, given sexuality used as a means of self-identification can be traced in sources from the Greek and Roman past. As discussed in the introduction, the Foucauldian model suggests that sexual roles and the nature of sexuality itself are culturally rather than naturally bestowed, and therefore it is more helpful to think of sexual activity as a behaviour pattern or means of relating to others, rather than an integral attribute of an individual like being brown-eyed or left-handed. Male homosexuality in antiquity has a part to play in this dispute. Where on the spectrum of sexual orientation does one place Athenian citizen males, who at different times in their lives and in different contexts would have sexual relationships with both women and men? Constructionists would argue that performing the masculine, non-passive role of the citizen was the most important action, not the gender of their partner choice; and indeed that 'homosexual' as an isolable category is scarcely a century old.⁴ Essentialists, on the other hand, would argue that ancient sources exist which intimate that there were men who consistently and regularly preferred men as sexual partners, who did not observe asymmetry of age and status as a crucial element of partner choice,⁵ and even that some were 'conscious of erotic inclination towards their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic.'⁶

The investigation of male homosexuality from all periods of Egyptian history has something to offer this controversy, although one may not hope for such a study to yield any definite answers. Perhaps the most interesting and potentially fruitful area is to look at earlier

Egyptian attitudes towards same-sex relationships and try to gauge how they reacted to Greek ideas. Some evidence suggests that Greek paradigms soon began to apply, at least in Hellenised areas of Egypt. Alternatively, even after centuries of cultural interaction, some material from native Egyptian milieux seems to show a notion of inherent and regularly-practised homosexuality. Coptic, the last phase of the Egyptian language, translates New Testament Greek terms for passive male homosexuals (*arsenokoitês* or *sodomites*) by a complicated verbal noun indicating habituity, which one might render into English as ‘he-who-regularly-performs-the-act-of-sleeping-with-a-male’.⁷ The very fact that the translators used an Egyptian term rather than borrowing the Greek word is in itself worthy of note: maybe it contained some kind of subtle cultural referent for them which the Greek words could not convey. To see what, if any, validity this idea may have, it may be helpful to start with a survey of the situation in Pharaonic Egypt.

The Pharaonic Background

In Egypt, sexual relationships between men never received the same formal recognition as a cultural institution that they did in classical Athens. Homosexuality is never mentioned as being an important component of social or educational life among the élite, and most references to it are negative, tending to characterise it as a socially dangerous act on a par with adultery or physical violence towards others. It seems to me, however, that indigenous Egyptian attitudes to male homosexuality had some features which are not entirely paralleled by those of the Græco-Roman world. Although the Egyptian evidence is extremely restricted, male-male relationships may not have been wholly predicated on the essential inequity which characterised classical ideas about them. Egyptian literature describing sexual activity between men does not use the imagery of warfare, flight, pursuit and dominance in the same way as Greek and Roman writing. Homosexual acts in some Egyptian texts take place between partners of at least comparable age and status. Furthermore one tale, the story of a secret affair between a king and a general, suggests that the Egyptians could conceive of regular homosexuality between coevals, something that is apparently at odds with classical norms of homosexual behaviour.

One feature about sex between men that seems to have concerned the Egyptians was that it involved a waste of sperm. The late John Boswell (an ‘essentialist’) pointed out that in the Hellenistic world, because ‘sexuality had traditionally been restricted on the basis of standards of decorum and propriety rather than procreative purpose,

the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy has largely been absent from public discourse.’⁸ Egyptian religious writings, conversely, found homosexuality problematic because it was doomed to sterility: the interaction of the two sexes was the regenerative force of the universe, and homosexuality was a negation of this life-giving power. This is made clear in the funerary texts whose purpose was to enable the dead person to pass through their postmortem transitions successfully and be reborn in a perfect, vital form. The so-called ‘negative confession’ in Chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead* is a sort of moral catechism which gives a hierarchy of taboo sexual (and other) behaviour that will result in the deceased not being reborn. ‘I have not committed adultery ... I have not been unchaste ... I have not done wrong sexually, or committed homosexuality,’ declares the dead man to the various underworld gods. This text has a very particular function in a context where one would hardly expect non-reproductive sex to appear, but other Egyptian evidence suggests that same-gender sexual activity was regarded at least with suspicion. An early Middle Kingdom wisdom text, the so-called *Maxims of Ptahhotpe*, codifies socially sanctionable conduct among the court élite. Maxim 32 says, ‘do not copulate with a woman-boy, for you know that what is opposed will be a [necessity] to his heart, and that which is in his body will not be calmed. Let him not spend the night doing what is opposed so that he may be calm after he has satisfied his desire.’⁹ Perhaps Ptahhotpe’s advice is that homosexuality between men is to be avoided as it is sexually unsatisfying, again perhaps because it is unproductive.

Also, Egyptians do not seem to have conceived male-male relationships in quite the same terms of power dynamics as the classical world. The dichotomy between penetrator and penetrated, illustrated so clearly by the ‘indecent proposal’ from Roman Oxyrhynchus, was not such an important determinant as it was for the Greeks. This idea is expressed in the various stories about the conflict of Horus and Seth,¹⁰ which contain the only explicit homosexual scenes in Egyptian writing. The story of the battle between Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, and Seth, the god of disorder and confusion, is a parable for the maintenance of cosmic equilibrium. In a fragment of the tale preserved on a Middle Kingdom papyrus, Seth seeks to vanquish Horus by many means, and one of the methods open to him is sexual.

The divine person of Seth said to the divine person of Horus: ‘How beautiful are your buttocks, how vital! [...] Stretch out your legs.’ The divine person of Horus said: ‘Wait that I may tell it [...] to their palace.’

Horus then tells his mother Isis of Seth's desire and what he can do to avoid it. Unfortunately the part of the papyrus describing what Isis imagines them doing together is badly damaged, but she tells Horus: 'when he has aroused you, place your fingers between your buttocks [...] the seed which has come forth from his penis without letting the sun see it.'¹¹ She expects that Seth will enter Horus rectally.

In another episode of the story, intercrural sex is an essential part of the narrative:

Seth said to Horus: 'Come, let us spend a pleasant hour at my house.' Horus answered, 'With pleasure, with pleasure.' When it was evening a bed was spread for them and they lay down. During the night Seth made his penis stiff and he placed it between the loins of Horus. Horus put his hands between his loins and caught the sperm of Seth.¹²

Horus tells Isis what has happened, and again she acts as his magical helper. She helps him ejaculate into a jar, and then smears Horus' sperm over Seth's favourite vegetable, lettuce, often associated with sperm because of its milky sap when cut. When Seth eats the lettuce, Horus' sperm enters him, and he becomes pregnant.

These sexual encounters have usually been interpreted as acts of symbolic dominance and aggression. They signify 'the ignominy dealt to the conquered by the conqueror.'¹³ In fact, there seem to be some elements of reciprocity and equality in these stories. Firstly, there is no disparity of age or status between Horus and Seth: both are fully grown and on the same level of divinity. Secondly, there is the question of activity and passivity. Horus may not be strong enough to dominate Seth physically, but he can still penetrate him and place his sperm in Seth's body by magical means. Horus and Seth are equals in terms of their ability to penetrate, and the significance of the act goes beyond a symbolic representation of victor and vanquished.¹⁴ Thirdly, there is Horus' consent to sexual relations with Seth, who does not rape or violate Horus, but makes him a proposition (couched in the same euphemisms as for heterosexual intercourse) which he accepts, presumably in the anticipation of enjoying it.

Some of the same notions appear to surface in the only overdy sexual scene between human males in an Egyptian narrative. Here the protagonists are the historical Old Kingdom ruler Neferkare Pepi II and the general Saset. Fragments of versions of this tale are poorly preserved on a number of papyri, which date between the New Kingdom and about 700 BCE.¹⁵ The beginning of the story is too badly damaged to yield consecutive sense, but makes a tantalising reference to general Saset amusing the king 'because there was no woman' (or 'wife') 'there with him'. In the line above, the word 'love' stands alone

in a very broken context. After another lacunose episode, a new character, Teti son of Henet, is introduced, who saw

the divine person of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Neferkare, going out during the night to walk on his own, there being nobody with him. Then [Teti] moved away from the king to avoid being seen by him. Teti son of Henet kept still and said to himself, 'if this is the case, then it is true what is said about him, that he goes forth during the night.' With a clear conscience, Teti son of Henet followed the divine one to watch everything that he was going to do. [The king] arrived at the house of the general Saset. He threw up a stone and stamped his foot, at which a [ladder] was lowered down for him. He climbed up, and Teti son of Henet waited for his divine person's return. When his divine person had done what he wanted to with [the general], he returned to the palace, and Teti son of Henet followed him ... his divine person had gone to the house of the general Saset at the fourth hour of the night (10 p.m.) and spent another four hours at the house of the general.

The tale stresses the clandestine nature of the affair. It mentions the rumours of the king's nocturnal cruising, and him being spied upon as he goes out for his sexual rendezvous with Saset. The role inversion of the king going to the general's house rather than vice versa also enhances the secrecy. All these features of the narrative apparently imply censure of homosexuality. But as far as can be told from the rest of the story, Neferkare is not criticised *per se* for having sex with another man but for being a bad ruler, rather like Marlowe's Edward II. I wonder whether Neferkare's homosexuality here is an early example of a trope in literature which criticises bad rulers: that they indulge in unfettered sexual activity of whatever kind. The sexual nature of what they do is not important; what is emphasised is that they like it too much and do it too often. The Neferkare story implies that his four-hour sex sessions with Saset are regular liaisons, and with no less a person than a seemingly unmarried general, not a pretty little catamite.

The same category of allegations is found in later texts criticising 'excessive' rulers of Egypt. For instance, in the third century BCE, Ptolemy IV receives repeated criticism for his lack of self-discipline,¹⁶ one manifestation of which is his unbridled relationship with his male lover Agathocles. And in the second century CE, the Emperor Hadrian's love for the handsome Antinous was castigated because Hadrian allowed it to get out of control, not because Antinous was another man.

Egypt...received a new god when the emperor of the Romans deified his lover Antinous with the most solemn honours, just as Zeus took Ganymede up to heaven; for one cannot easily cut short a passion which took no account of shame.¹⁷

So the sources for male homosexuality from Pharaonic Egypt are certainly not positive towards it, but still express an equivocality which may in itself argue against there having been a single, monolithic 'attitude' to it which prevailed. In a discussion of Roman views of Greek love, Ramsay MacMullen said that

no one should speak of *the* Roman attitude toward male homosexuality, in the singular, nor should anyone try to describe perceptions of that subject in the Roman world from a small range of texts. The true picture must show all sorts of exceptions, contradictions, and tensions.¹⁸

It seems to me that if one read this back substituting 'Egyptian' for 'Roman', one might be approaching the real status of male-male relationships in pre-Hellenistic Egypt.

Homosexual Life in City and Country

As might be expected, evidence for homosexuality from Græco-Roman Egypt is scanty. The same provisos apply to its interpretation as to the other sources that have been used here to attempt a reconstruction of sexual life. They are primarily male-centred and urban, and consequently there are very few references to the non-élite, people living outside towns and cities, and women. If it is difficult to map male-male relationships in Egypt, reconstructing same-sex activity between women is even more of a challenge. Women had less access to writing than men, and unlike men they had no institutionalised outlets for same-sex feelings; local art and literature are all but silent about them. Moreover, if ancient male homosexuality was in practice a fundamentally unequal relationship, one would not expect it to produce very much written documentation anyway. A well-to-do man, for instance, could have the sexual use of his male slaves within the private world of his house if he wished; only if he went around violating the slaves of others, a crime against property, might the sexual act make any mark upon the written sources.¹⁹ Most of the information has to be pieced together using such scraps of evidence as have survived: literature and a handful of letters, legal documents and magical papyri. As with the earlier period, no entirely clear picture emerges as to whether there existed any group of people living in

Egypt whose regular sexual partners were other members of the same sex.

Alexandria in the Ptolemaic period is the first place in Egypt where mentions of homosexuality appear with any regularity, in the literary record at least. Models for many of the social and educational bodies for élite men in the cities of Græco-Roman Egypt were provided by Athenian-style institutions, such as the gymnasium and ephebate. A homosexual atmosphere was an integral part of the culture of these institutions. Élite boys studying in the rhetorical schools would have been exposed to the dialogues of Plato, with their philosophisation of man-boy relationships, or the poetry of so-called pederastie lyricists and elegiacists such as Ibycus and Theognis. The literary production of Alexandria itself suggests that there was plenty of opportunity for sex with other men. Relationships with good-looking boys are a regular theme of Alexandrian writing, though of course there is always the possibility that this is a literary conceit which does not necessarily contain any real-life referent. It is impossible to know whether homoerotic Alexandrian poetry imitated life, or life imitated it, or neither; but there must be at least some confluence of literature and reality. Certainly rich Romans seem to have taken on the culture of luxury from the Greek East via Alexandria 'as a way of life imported as a package',²⁰ and male homosexuality was a part of this package, at least in the Romans' perception. This apparatus of pleasure surrounding the privileged metropolitan male contained all kinds of homosexual references. He could walk on mosaics depicting eroticised mythical characters such as Ganymede, the archetypal male love-object, or Hippolytus.²¹ He could gaze at fine statues of naked ephebes and athletes. He could socialise at all-male drinking parties where expensive imported wines – 'sweet-smelling wine from Thasos, fragrant wine from Lesbos ... Italian wine that is redolent of flowers'²² – were poured out by handsome and available boys.

It was in this atmosphere that the court poets and epigrammatists of the third century BCE, such as Callimachus, Dioscorides and Asclepiades, lived and wrote in such physically enthusiastic terms about the young men to whom they were attracted. Yet all three of these poets also write about affairs with women. The male-male relationship assumed in these short lyric poems is the familiar one of an older man courting an adolescent. In spite of being conventional within the epigram format, Callimachus' encounters are described in disciplined yet lively language which evokes real events and situations: as Callimachus himself says, 'if I lie, you may at least be persuaded by what you hear.'²³ There are boys who play hard-to-get, mercenary boys, promiscuous boys. Callimachus adopts a self-deprecating tone in his epigrams to his male lovers, and one can only

wonder whether they were very satisfactory relationships. In the following epigram, Callimachus rebukes the greedy Menippus, who is demanding gifts or money, using a contemporary idiom; ‘don’t tell me my own dream’ was a proverb. The implication is, of course, that Menippus will take his favours elsewhere if Callimachus is not forthcoming:

I know my hands are empty
Of gifts, but by the Graces
Don’t tell me my own dream.
It’s dreadful to hear such
Taunts from you, Menippus,
And so un-loverlike of you, dear boy.²⁴

Another poem points to the potential ease of finding male lovers, even when money is not involved, and how favourites were competed for:

I hate the poems in the Epic Cycle, I don’t like highways
that are heavily travelled, I despise
a promiscuous lover, and I don’t drink from public
fountains:

Everything public disgusts me. And yes, Lysanias,
you are as handsome as handsome, but before I can even
say it,
back comes the echo: ‘Some other man has him.’²⁵

Callimachus’ Alexandrian epigrams to boys would seem to offer little to the debate between constructionalists and ‘essentialists’. Are they expressions of a self-identifying homosexuality among an artsy metropolitan élite, or the reworking of a set of poetic commonplaces? Any analysis of the sexual situations they express is always going to be inextricable from the subjectivity of literary criticism, especially the extent to which a ‘real’ emotional investment by the poet in the love object can be detected in his words. The social and sexual realities lying behind the Alexandrian epigrammatists remain elusive.

At a later epoch, a far more polarised picture of homosexuality in the city is painted by the Christian polemicist Clement of Alexandria, who worked in the city towards the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries CE. His book *The Paedagogus* or ‘Christ the Teacher’ is essentially a manual of good behaviour for rich urban Christians, but still reflects standards of appropriate conduct for the pre-Christian Alexandrian upper class. ‘Effeminacy’ is a familiar theme of Greek and Roman invectives, but Clement’s treatment of it is interesting, because, in some ways, he approaches certain kinds of homosexual men as a group with a distinct and permanent identity.

Clement's pagan Alexandria is a world turned upside down, where humans are constantly tampering with nature, and homosexuals are his embodiments of unnaturalness *par excellence*.²⁶ In Clement, homosexuals and prostitutes are constantly juxtaposed as recognisable and dangerous urban figures. In fact, homosexuals even have some of the same distinguishing marks as female prostitutes, such as the wearing of gold ankle-chains. Reiterating the idea that 'the characteristic of a man is action, and of a female, passivity',²⁷ his vitriol is reserved for the *kinaidos* (plural *kinaidoi*), the passive and unmanly partner in a homosexual relationship who allows himself to be penetrated. In the *Paedagogus* Clement gives what amounts to a series of instructions for identifying the *kinaidos* on the streets of the big city, mostly based on their 'unnaturalness'. He says that it is possible to spot from their appearance 'adulterers and effeminate (*androgynoi*) who go on the hunt for both kinds of sex.'²⁸ Firstly, they pay too much attention to their appearance. They shave off their beards or pluck them out with tweezers, and have their bodies entirely depilated with decoctions of pitch. Hairiness, to Clement, is *the* physical mark of a real man. *Kinaidoi* arrange their hair in elaborate womanish styles, and perfume themselves with scented oil, a feminising inversion of the healthfully masculine oil used after exercise in the gymnasium. They dress in impractical, trailing garments and wear too much jewellery. Secondly, *kinaidoi* are recognisable by their voices and deportment. Clement's ideal man is one who does not know 'how to lisp, nor how to mince around effeminately with head on one side, as I see so many other smooth-skinned *kinaidoi* doing in the city. Men must absolutely avoid making any womanish movements, and softness and daintiness.'²⁹ *Kinaidoi* also have a feminine, languid bearing, and make studiously graceful gestures while trying to preserve the elegant arrangement of their clothes. Other writers took the womanliness and penetrability of the Alexandrian *kinaidoi* to its logical conclusion, and said that they could get pregnant and give birth to offspring. 'Dorotheus the physician noted in his *Medical Memoranda* that at Alexandria in Egypt, a *kinaidos* gave birth, and the infant was embalmed and kept, because it was such an extraordinary event.'³⁰ The world of the Alexandrian *kinaidos* was certainly inverted.

Clement provides more information about these mincing, over-groomed, inseminable popinjays. They go around in packs; they are entertaining, if riotous company, and consort with rich childless women whom they amuse with their sexual gossip. There is even a characteristic noise *kinaidoi* make, 'a noise in their noses like a frog, just as if they kept their spleen stored up their nostrils.'³¹ The 'noise in their noses like a frog' sets up another trope of Clement's presentation of the *kinaidoi*: they are bestial, non-human, as well as being

womanish. The fact that his discourse pays so much attention to *kinaidoi* and prostitutes as poles of unacceptable male and female behaviour surely means that both were comprehensible, if stereotyped, groups to his anticipated audience.

The central problem with Clement's *kinaidoi* is whether their behaviour displays an inherent psychological necessity, or a set of attitudes. Even when due account is taken of the hyperbole in Clement's Christian rhetoric, his descriptions of Alexandrian *kinaidoi* are strikingly evocative of a group which identified itself by its sexual preferences and had evolved a code of dress, speech and body language which expressed this identity. It is even reminiscent of more recent mythologies of gay men as hanging around with fag hags in bitchy urban coteries. If one reads Clement's account of *kinaidos* clothing and gestures as the conscious semiotics of a subculture, it is important for the question of predetermined rather than constructed homosexuality in antiquity. Clement presents the sexual status of his *kinaidoi* as an integral and fully-explored part of their way of life, certainly not as a passing and controlled phase of sexual behaviour. If one takes the constructionist line that human sexuality 'is never more than a set of potentialities, rich and ever-varying, tied above all to whatever is currently viewed as social reality,'³² then Clement's *kinaidoi* were certainly not availing themselves of the polymorphous pleasures that the city offered. As a general focus for moral reproach, nothing positive is heard about *kinaidoi*, but they are, at least in Alexandria, highly visible figures of Clement's urban scene.

Certain magico-mystic texts from Egypt (discussed fully in [Chapter 8](#)), perhaps think about *kinaidoi* in rather the same terms as Clement: men who are permanently that way can be created, either by unfavourable combinations of stars and planets, or by magical means as a form of revenge. An unexpected source for *kinaidoi* in Græco-Roman Egypt is the so-called *Cyranides*, a work ascribed to the god Hermes Trismegistus but pseudonymously published by 'Harpocraton'. The existing form of the book is probably an Alexandrian product of the first or second century CE, but incorporates a good deal of much older Egyptian matter. Essentially the *Cyranides* is a medico-magical treatise, whose recipes claim to harness the inherent magical properties of natural objects on the theory of sympathy and antipathy. The first book of this strange work has 24 chapters, one for every letter of the alphabet. Each chapter lists the magical properties of a plant, a bird, a fish and a stone beginning with the relevant letter, and symbolising the four cosmic elements of earth, air, water and fire respectively. It ends with the rules for making a talisman out of the stone, into which the plant, bird and fish elements beginning with the same letter are incorporated. What

interests me is the tenth chapter, dealing with the letter k. K is for *kinaidos*, and the instructions for the talisman show how to make any man into one of these deviant creatures.

The talisman is to be made from the *kinaidion*-stone, obsidian, and is very mighty and able to change the natures (*physeis*, which also means genitalia) of humankind and of all animals, and likewise the inclinations (*gnômas*) of males, especially men, so that he who touches or wears the stone will become weak and effeminate. Engrave in the obsidian a castrated man with his genitals lying at his feet, his hands pointed downwards, while he is looking down towards his genitals; on the reverse, (engrave) Aphrodite turning her face backwards and looking at him.

The engraved stone is to be included, with the wing of the *kinaidios*-bird and the stone of the *kinaidios*-fish, into a strap so that it is invisible.

Now if a man touches the strap, he will have no erection, and if he wears it without knowing that he does so, he will be made effeminate. If he tastes of the stone of the *kinaidios*-fish, he will become a complete *kinaidos* and will never be restored to normal sexual relations. If a woman wears that strap, nobody will come together with her in sexual intercourse, because the man will not get an erection.³³

So in the logic of 'Harpocraton', becoming a *kinaidos* is a permanent and irreversible state of being, which can even happen against one's will. The Alexandrian astrological writers seem to be of the same opinion: sexual orientations can be allotted by the stars under which one was born. Like Clement, the astrologers are interested in making deviance recognisable. One of the most interesting things about the astrologers' discussion of *kinaidoi* is that they divide the field into those for whom being a *kinaidos* is not a publicly recognised part of themselves, and those for whom it is. Some combinations of stars and planets produce 'those who make a public display of their deviance and even bring it forth openly ... namely castrati, eunuchs, or sterile and impenetrable females.'³⁴ The key words here are 'make a public display of their deviance'. The astrologers, therefore, can conceive of somebody who is openly a *kinaidos*, a man whose sexual preference for men is not self-determined but inherent.

So much for Alexandrian literature, polemics and popular science: what do the documents have to say about homosexuality? A few

documentary sources suggest that the homosexual atmosphere which characterised the Greek privileged organisations might have been imported into Egypt along with them. In December 257 BCE one Hierocles, a connection of the estate manager Zenon, wrote to a doctor named Artemidorus of his fear that he might be suspected of sexual misconduct with the trainees at an Alexandrian wrestling school. The background to the letter, as far as it can be pieced together, was rather complicated. Hierocles had sponsored, with two other men, the establishment of a wrestling-school (*palaestra*). The two other men are now out of the city and Hierocles is concerned that if he takes charge of the palaestra himself, he will be accused of doing it only because he wanted to pick up the pupils: 'I will have the gravest suspicion attaching to me that I am a lover of young boys (*philoneos*).' Hierocles goes on to ask Artemidorus to use all his influence to get Ptolemaius, a trainer of presumably blameless reputation, to take charge of the palaestra. The letter (P. Lugd. Bat. XX 51) ends with a puzzling final remark: 'I do not wish to be conquered by a mean-spirited man' This seems to refer to Hierocles' rivalry with a certain Metrodorus, perhaps the man who was going to bring the accusation of pederasty against him, but it is unclear why Hierocles is so concerned about the charge. The rivalry with Metrodorus and the ignominy of an accusation from him seems to be more important to Artemidorus than the charge *per se*. What is striking is the manipulation of what was obviously a normal social situation: it was easy for trainers to seduce boys at the palaestra. A first-century CE papyrus (P. Oxy. III 466) from Oxyrhynchus makes clear the homoerotic potential of the wrestling school. This curious piece is apparently a set of instructions from a wrestling manual for directing clinches, written in a strange clipped jargon, without definite articles:

Get up close, right hand round his head, twist round. You, put your arm around him. You, go underneath, twist round. You, move forward and put your arm round him. You, twist round from below with right arm. You, put arm round him where he's got hold of you from below and bring left leg up to his side. You, push him away with the left hand. You, change place and twist round. You, change place. You, grab him by the balls.

In fact, epigrams from an anthology of homosexual poetry use the double entendres of this wrestling master's jargon in an explicitly sexual way.³⁵

It is not known whether Hierocles the trainer managed to avoid his name being blackened by accusations of homosexual misbehaviour. However, these remained a useful slur to bring up against important

public figures in Alexandria. As innumerable politicians who have been implicated in media sex scandals know to their cost, accusations of personal sexual impropriety against public figures are barometers of ideal moral standards. Interesting here is the case of Caius Vibius Maximus, the former praefect of Egypt. His trial was probably held at Rome between 107 and 109 CE, but fragments of the prosecution speeches have been preserved on two papyri from Egypt, and the sexual misdemeanours he is supposed to have committed all took place at Alexandria.³⁶ Maximus was a friend of Pliny the Younger and other literary figures at Rome, from whom it is known that Maximus was married and had a son born in 95 CE. Given the fragmentary nature of the record, it is uncertain what the counts against Maximus were, but one of the charges may well have been sexual corruption (Latin *stuprum*) of a noble Alexandrian youth. Although the context is missing, and the unknown advocate for the prosecution has a particular political axe to grind, he still paints a vivid picture of conceptions of an unsanctionable homosexual relationship among the ruling class at Alexandria. Whatever the indictments, the prosecution won the case. Maximus' name was erased from the monuments commemorating him, and he was probably sent into exile.

The extant section of the prosecution speech begins with accusations of Maximus' financial misdealings and his abuse of position. He is supposed to have taken bribes, interfered in civic appointments, and extracted the interest on loans before the borrowers had even received the money. There is also an implication of *lèse-majesté*, with Maximus becoming increasingly inaccessible for day-to-day business as power goes to his head. This account of uncontrolled behaviour in a responsible person sets the scene for the sexual slurs. A statement about Maximus' infatuation with an upper-class boy was read out in court (not preserved on the papyrus) which prompts the response:

Now this last document puts the final seal on the high regard and physical desire he felt for the boy . . . why else did a boy aged 17 dine with you every day? Whenever any of our witnesses here was invited to join you for a banquet (not an easy thing to gain such a favour from you when you had assumed such regal airs), they all saw the boy at your drinking-party, both with his father *and* alone. Each of them saw the shameless glances and shameless carryings-on of these male lovers ... the witnesses testify, swearing by the oath of the Emperor, that while they were waiting gathered at the door to salute Maximus, they saw the boy coming out of the bedroom alone, virtually displaying the signs of Maximus'

intimacy with him. And once accustomed to shame, this handsome and rich youth gave himself airs, and became so impudent that he fooled around with Eutychus the bed-chamber attendant, holding his hands; and he used to burst into loud and unrestrained laughter in the midst of Maximus' clients. And far from being innocent, he used to exhibit to Maximus' debtor what he had been doing.

Now the orator addresses Maximus directly once again, attacking the hypocritical discrepancy between his public deportment and his private actions:

And you, with your severe comportment and austere demeanour, why did you not try to stop him? When a poor man petitioned you, you ordered his property and that of his wife and friend to be confiscated ... yet a still beardless and handsome youth, at his physical peak, you kept all day in the governor's residence, and no longer sent him off to school or to do the exercises appropriate for the young. How much more, and justifiably too, would you have blamed his own father for not training him in these ways?

You took the boy with you around the whole of Egypt when you went on official duties. Did not a boy of 17 accompany you when you dispensed justice publicly? Was he not at your side at Memphis and Pelusium and wherever you were?

At this point the papyrus becomes too fragmentary to translate.

Of course this is a piece of forensic oratory, designed to create an image of Maximus as a person deserving punishment. Some features of the physical layout of the papyrus suggest that it may have been presented as a chamber drama. But it is instructive to see how the orator exploits what is, after all, the paradigmatic male-male relationship of the ancient world, between an older man of élite status and a good-looking youth, in Maximus' case about the same age as his own son. The boy is 17 years old, an adult technically, but he is still beardless, an important determinant of his availability for homosexual relations.³⁷ The main emphasis of the speech is placed on Maximus' lack of self-control in both private and official life. His affair with the boy is censured not because of the sexual protocols themselves, but because the sexual protocols have over-run the accepted boundaries. Maximus spends *too much* time with his lover. The boy becomes his constant companion, even accompanying Maximus on official business to the neglect of the physical and intellectual training that would have inculcated some discipline in him. Maximus is literally a corrupter of youth, and the signs of corruption are contagious and begin to show in

the boy. The ideal élite youth, according to Clement of Alexandria, should have ‘gestures and movements which give no hope to those who cannot control their passions, but instead modesty should rest upon his countenance, and firmness be evident in the face.’³⁸ But Maximus’ young lover exhibits no such self-control. As he leaves Maximus’ bedroom, his expression and demeanour obviously betray what he has been doing in bed with the praefect. He has behaved in public without decorum, being fondled by Maximus and flirting with the steward. The signs of debauchery will soon begin to show on the lad, who may gradually turn into one of Clement’s flapping, twittering *kinaidoi*.

Presumably the urban environment would have offered more opportunities for homosexual encounters. A letter (P. Oxy. VIII 1160) written at Alexandria and sent to Oxyrhynchus has sometimes been cited as evidence for the ease and acceptability of homosexuality in the city,³⁹ but as is so often the case, this reading hinges on the interpretation of a single disputed word. Most of the contents of this letter are mundane. Trophimus greets his father Horigenes and other relatives in the usual way, cheerfully dismisses his father’s thanks for a gift of money he has sent him, asks for a pot of oil, and then concludes: ‘you wrote to me saying, “you are staying at Alexandria with your *muchos*!’ Write and tell me, who is my *muchos*?’ *Muchos* is an otherwise unattested word, which is presumed to be a mis-spelling of *moichos*, ‘adulterer’, and interpreted in this context as ‘homosexual paramour’. This reading does appear problematic, since other uses of this word and its derivatives refer to men committing adultery with married women; but it is not easy to think of what other word might be read in place of *moichos*. The letter has a jocular tone throughout, so maybe *muchos* conceals some irretrievable family joke. It is certainly not enough evidence on which to base a theory of regular and vernacular homosexual relationships at Alexandria.

The preceding texts suggest that the homosexual networks which can be reconstructed were metropolitan and élite, and to some extent may have been connected with Greek-modelled social organisations where male-male relationships had traditionally played a part. The situation in the provincial towns and the villages is more difficult to define. Here homosexual relationships would surely have been limited by the availability of potential partners and such imponderables as the internal dynamics of the household. Christian writers say that at Antinoöpolis the festivals of Antinous, the deified lover of Hadrian, were occasions for sexual encounters between men, but these accounts should perhaps be read with some scepticism.⁴⁰

The range of evidence for homosexuality is restricted, but there are a few illuminating texts. There is, for instance, this Ptolemaic graffito

(SB III 6840) scrawled on the wall of a chapel in the temple of Amun-Re at Karnak (Figure 10). It reads: ‘Ptolemaius. They fucked him in the street. Ptolemaius son of Abdes. They buggered him in the same street. The one who was buggered [is] PTOLEMAIUS.’ A casual sexual encounter out of doors, up against the temple wall? Or a piece of slander? The way that the name Ptolemaius is emphasised, written out in larger letters and separate from the rest of the graffito to catch the eye, may suggest this. On the other hand, one might expect that Ptolemaius would have defaced the graffito branding him as a *kinaidos* if he had ever seen it, which was presumably the point of the graffito being written in the first place.⁴¹ Perhaps it was originally accompanied by a caricature of Ptolemaius, which would have made clear the intention of the writer.

Figure 10 Homosexual graffito from the temple of Karnak. (c. 2nd century BCE: redrawn from *Annales du Service des Antiquités d'Égypte* 23 (1923) 139 = SB III 6840)

Private letters are as discreet as ever on sexual matters, but some do seem to have contained expressions of homoaffectionalism, such as this short letter written on an ostracon (O. Claud. 151) and found at an army camp in the Eastern Desert: ‘Sabinus to his dearest Zosimus, very many greetings. I ask you to keep an eye on my boys (*paidarioi*) so that no harm (*hybris*) comes to them. I pray for your health, my sweetest.’ Sabinus’ phraseology is tantalisingly ambiguous. *Paidarioi* can mean slave boys, sometimes with an implication of being the passive partner in a man-boy relationship: *hybris* has an enormous range of meanings, sometimes indicating sexual violence. And in letters the term ‘sweetest’ (*glykutatos*) is normally applied to close female relatives or children.

Other, more formal, documents make less equivocal statements about male homosexuality. I have already discussed how the provisions of marriage contracts articulate ideal moral standards, and some of these contracts include stipulations that the husband is not to

maintain a male lover. When Philiscus married Apollonia in the Fayyum town of Tebtynis in 92 BCE, their contract (P. Tebt. I 104. 16–22) included a clause promising that he would

supply to Apollonia all necessities and clothing and whatever is proper for a wedded wife, whether he is at home or abroad, so far as their property shall admit. It shall not be lawful for Philiscus to bring in any wife other than Apollonia, nor to keep a concubine or a boy lover (*paidikon*), nor to beget children by any other woman in Apollonia's lifetime, nor to live in another house over which Apollonia is not mistress, nor to eject or insult or maltreat her.

This provision may have a moral overtone: Philiscus is not only forbidden to bring sex partners other than his wife into the common household, but forbidden to maintain them in any way at all. It does, however, suggest that a *paidikon* was a potentially available partner in Tebtynis and that the maintenance of him within the marital home was not an inconceivable situation. Male slaves would probably have been the main sexual target for those wealthy enough to own them, but such relationships are by definition difficult to trace. Funerary commemorations of dead slaves express the deep feelings some owners had for them, and it is not impossible that such feelings may have had a sexual component. What emotional scenario, for instance, led to Cassianus freeing his handsome slave boy Eutyches? (See Plate 10.) Perhaps Eutyches was his *delicius*, his catamite, perhaps not. At the very least Cassianus cared enough about Eutyches to liberate him, pay for an expensive burial, and even record his manumission in a docket on the boy's portrait, so that his free status would not be in doubt when he came to be reborn. And Pallas, the owner of a black slave called Epitynchanon, made him the subject of an elaborate verse epitaph, in which the blackness of his physical body is contrasted with the whiteness of his noble soul.⁴²

But the most tangible and personal evocations of what it was like for one man to desire another in Græco-Roman Egypt occur in the erotic magical texts, which provide many strategies for resolving sexual situations and bringing sexual ideals into being. Most of these are, in effect, remedies for unfulfilled passion, in which the enchanter presumably hopes to be the active/dominant partner. The terminology and imagery of these spells is fully discussed in [Chapter 8](#), so it will suffice to quote some examples here.

One such spell⁴³ was used by a man called Papollo to gain the affections of another man, Phello son of Maurê. The papyrus was placed under the threshold of Phello's house, with the hope that as he walked over it, he would be magically inspired to be unable to resist

Papollo:

You will take over his heart and his mind, and you will have mastery over his whole body. When he wishes to stand, you will not allow him to stand; when he wishes to sit down, you will not allow him to sit down; but let him seek after me from village to village, from city to city, from country to country, until he comes to me and becomes subject under my feet ... until I have fulfilled the desire of my heart and the longing of my soul, with a good will and an inextinguishable physical desire, now now, quickly quickly!

Another charm (PGM LXVI), originally dated to the third century CE, but in fact probably later and certainly from a Christian milieu,⁴⁴ aims to cause a quarrel between a certain Philoxenus and two other men: Gennadius who is designated as his 'friend' (*philos*), a regular term for lover, and Pelagius, whose role in the whole ménage is unclear. The spell begins with an invocation of magical names: 'CHAOR, CHTHOR, CHARARBA, CHOLBAS, CHTHRYTHYR, CHORBATH, CHTHAMNO, CHTHODYCHRA, CHYCHCHYCH.' It continues: 'I conjure you by the magical names: throw Philoxenus the cantor into strife with his friend (*philos*) Gennadius. Throw Pelagius the elder into strife with Philoxenus the cantor.'

The papyrus is illustrated with a rough drawing of two naked men in a pugilistic position, the second, bearded figure (Pelagius?) holding the hand of the other figure with his right hand, and what may be his penis in his left (see Plate n). One could interpret it to mean that the unknown writer of the charm was interested in Gennadius, the friend of Philoxenus, and that Pelagius was a competing older man in the relationship. However, *philos* has a wide range of meanings, of which lover is only one; and indeed there is nothing about the papyrus to show that it could not have been written by or for a woman. The absence of anything unequivocally erotic in the text or drawing makes it unsafe to say that the spell was provoked by homosexual jealousy.

Sometimes sexual attraction between males could be magically evoked and exploited for reasons other than the satisfaction of physical desire. In a third-century CE lead tablet from Alexandria,⁴⁵ Ionicus uses standard formulae from the erotic magical spells to gain power over another man, Annianus. 'May Annianus lose his power of reflection and let him remember only Ionicus ... control the love of Annianus for Ionicus before everything else, now.' However, the spell contains no mention of Ionicus wanting to have sex with Annianus, unlike all the rest of the erotic spells which hope to bring the desired state of affairs into being by uttering it. Maybe Ionicus wanted to be able to render Annianus helpless by making him fall in love with him,

apparently without intending to submit to him sexually, and thereby to be able to control him for another reason which is unstated.

Lesbians⁴⁶

To move immediately from one magical text to another: in the third century CE, at the town of Hermopolis in Middle Egypt, a woman called Sophia was tormented with unconsummated desire for another woman, Gorgonia daughter of Nilogenia. She consulted a magical practitioner, who duly inscribed for her a small oval lead tablet with a magical prescription to obtain her desires.⁴⁷ After conjuring up the daemon, and an invocation to make it obedient to the practitioner's wishes, the spell repeats four times in slightly differing forms a petition to make Gorgonia love Sophia. Gorgonia is to be brought magically into a bath-house where the daemon, transformed into a bath woman, will heat her up, literally and metaphorically:

By means of this corpse daemon inflame the heart, the liver, the spirit of Gorgonia, whom Nilogenia bore, with love and physical desire (*philia*) for Sophia, whom Isara bore. Constrain Gorgonia, whom Nilogenia bore, to cast herself into the bath-house for the sake of Sophia, whom Isara bore; and you, become a bath-woman. Burn, set on fire, inflame her soul, heart, liver, spirit with love for Sophia, whom Isara bore. Drive Gorgonia, whom Nilogenia bore, drive her, torment her body day and night, force her to rush forth from every place and every house, loving Sophia, whom Isara bore, she, surrendered like a slave, giving herself and all her possessions to her, because this is the command of the great god *iartana ouousio ipsenthanchochainchoueoch aeeioyo iartana ouousio ipsoenpeu-thadei annoucheo aeeioyo*.

The way that the text on the lead tablet is written out shows that it is an adaptation of a set ritual to an unusual situation. The writer consistently neglected to put the personal names of the women involved in the correct grammatical case, probably because he or she was copying from a formula which had the equivalent of a blank to insert the appropriate name. But the fact that a spell to bring about the consummation of physical love between women uses the same formulae of control as any other spell to inspire love between individuals is significant. As expressed in the spell, the physical consummation of Sophia's desire for Gorgonia is no different from what it would be if Gorgonia were a man. If love between women can be controlled by the same means, the implication is that it has the

same pathology as any other kind of physical love, and therefore that it is conceptualised in the same way. In general, ancient attitudes to Lesbianism tended to be constructed in accordance with heterosexual models of phallic penetration, and on such models they could only be regarded as inadequate. The magical spell from Hermopolis seems to me to be quite in accord with the general ancient notion of sexual activity as a one-way street: penetration is essential for sex. 'Real' sex requires not only penetration but also ejaculation to moisten the woman's body and stop it becoming masculinised, so in ancient terms Lesbianism can never satisfy, medically or physically. Again the Egyptian astrological writers give some interesting insights into sexual stereotypes. In a passage describing the maleficent conjunctions of Venus and Saturn, Ptolemy writes that if Mars is present, men who have lost their genitals or women who are *tribades* will be produced.⁴⁸ *Tribades* are literally 'those who rub', and in an earlier passage Ptolemy discusses how a woman can become a *tribade*, and how she may behave sexually. *Tribades* are produced by Mars in configuration with Venus, which has a masculinising effect: males born under their influence will be more 'manly', but it will also have the same effect on women:

The males become addicted to normal sexual intercourse, but are adulterous, insatiable, and ready at all times for shameful and lawless sexual acts; while the females are lustful for unnatural congresses, cast inviting glances of the eyes. They are what we call *tribades*; for they deal with females and perform the function of the males. If Venus alone is constituted in a masculine manner, they do these things secretly and not openly. But if Mars is so constituted, they do it without restraint, so that sometimes they even designate the women with whom they are on such terms as their wives.⁴⁹

Like the *kinaidoi*, there are 'closet' *tribades* and open ones, who live with other women; but unlike *kinaidoi* they are active and act out a male part. *Kinaidoi* and *tribades* are passive womanish men and active mannish women who function as convenient poles of deviant sexual behaviour. As with her genital organs, a woman's sexuality, deviant or other, is constructed with the male as paradigm.

It has been suggested that in the Greek and Roman past, relationships between women may have been characterised by reciprocity, the fixed roles of pursuer and pursued so important for male homosexuality being absent: a version of Simone de Beauvoir's 'no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity, duality becomes mutuality.'⁵⁰ The surviving poetry of Sappho, the tenth Muse, is one of the few places from antiquity where scholars have

attempted to trace mutuality in love between women. Sappho's work was certainly read and appreciated in Egypt, and papyrus finds have been crucial for the reconstruction of her oeuvre. But a biography of Sappho (P. Oxy. XV 1800), read at Oxyrhynchus in the second century CE, feels that her semi-divine status as an honorary goddess was compromised by her private life: 'She is criticised by some as leading an undisciplined way of life and being a woman-lover (*gytiaikeraστρία*).' Again Lesbianism is conceived in terms of male relationships. The biographer speaks of Sappho being an *erastês* of women, that is the dominant, penetrating partner in an unequal relationship.

Similarly, the surviving Lesbian magical texts betray no such notion of mutuality between partners, but it is true that they are adaptations of spells written for men who wished to be in control. As the astrologers make clear, men writing about sexual activity between women think about it all in terms of penetration, with active and passive partners. The clearest example of this comes in Lucian's fifth *Dialogues of the Prostitutes*. Two courtesans, Leaena and Clonarium, are talking together about their clients. Clonarium has heard that Megilla, a wealthy woman from Lesbos, is in love with Leaena 'just like a man (*hôsper andra*)'. Clonarium professes not to know what women do together in bed. Leaena tells her how she went to supply musical entertainment for Megilla and her companion, Demonassa, at a women's drinking-party. Afterwards all three of them get into bed together, Megilla ripping off her wig to reveal a shaven scalp like an athlete. 'The woman is terribly mannish (*hê gunê de deinôi andrikê estin*); remarks Leaena. Megilla says to her, 'I was born a woman like the rest of you, but I have the mind and desires and everything else of a man.' She is about to show the prostitute 'the thing that she has instead of a man' when Leaena coyly refuses to give Clonarium any more details, leaving her as much in the dark as ever.

In ancient thinking, then, penis substitutes are necessary for proper Lesbian sex, and if the comic writer Herodas is to be believed, they were known to some women in Græco-Roman Egypt. Although it may be no more than male fantasising about women left alone, Herodas has dildoes (*baubones*, perhaps derived from the verb 'to pacify') circulating among groups of women, who buy them from a specially skilled and discreet cobbler and lend them to each other. According to Herodas' sixth mime, they are made of fine scarlet leather with small stitches that do not chafe, and are 'quite as straight as a man's penis'. They can be bought off the shelf, as it were, and were evidently rather expensive items. Coritto, one of the characters in the comic dialogue, is almost willing to prostitute herself to the old cobbler to get hold of one. Herodas' dildoes do not go around in a homosexual environment,

however, since the women lend them to each other for solitary use in the absence of men.

Maybe Herodas' vignettes of Alexandrian life are no more than standard Greek expressions of the uncontrolled hypersexuality of women. But his scenes of women talking to each other privately about sexual matters perhaps show that one should be looking for a less reductive definition of Lesbianism, one which is not predicated solely on sexual contact. Historians of Lesbianism, such as Adrienne Rich, have argued that it is more important to look for evidence of emotional bonding between women in male-dominant societies than for evidence of them touching each other's genitals. As I have said, the nature of the documentation makes it very difficult to trace such aspects of women's lives, and the most one can hope to reconstruct are the conditions which might have facilitated such female bonding: if women were segregated together during menstruation, for instance, or if they were left alone when their husbands were away. As with *kinaidoi*, official attitudes towards woman-woman relationships were negative.

Conclusions

Homosexual relationships were certainly on offer for those choosing from the erotic menu in Græco-Roman Egypt. What remains ambiguous is whether the decision to eat a certain dish was predestined by inborn personal disposition, or determined by what ingredients the chef had managed to buy at the market to create the *plat du jour*. The evidence for same-sex relationships does not demonstrate any single prevailing attitude about their aetiology or their social conception. Clement of Alexandria and the astrological writers are persuasive that there were such things as permanent, regular homosexuals of both sexes, individuals who, in some ways, approached the current category of being 'gay people': but both these sources are interested in defining norms in terms of oppositional deviance. The contribution of this to the essentialist/structuralist debate is similarly equivocal. Even the most dogmatic structuralist would be willing to concede that some aspects of sexuality are present, and might be distinguished, without determination by society; and by the same token some essentialists will admit that the same real manifestation of sexual life might be described by different taxonomies, some more accurate and helpful than others. If anything, this chapter demonstrates the difficulties of writing the history of minorities or, in Foucault's term, 'the history of the abject': one is faced with problems of censorship and distortion, absence of records, the difficulties of definition and vocabulary, and perhaps most

troublesome of all, how to write about what are essentially personal and private aspects of human feelings across the distance of time.

So far, this discussion of human sexuality has been based on a characteristically twentieth-century notion of private, individual sexual experience constituting the peak of emotional fulfilment. But in a world where the self is still nascent as a field of action, it may not necessarily be very helpful to think about erotic experience in entirely private and self-centred terms. I want next to shift from the private to public and from the individual to the shared, and examine how sexuality and sexual meanings may have been incorporated into communal experiences, specifically in the course of religious observance and festivals.

1 Clarke in Gazda (1991) 93 and nn. 17 and 19: 'All three of us, Agathopus and Primus and Epaphroditus, came at the same time.' They also figure frequently in erotic epigrams, such as *Palatine Anthology* XII 155 and 210.

2 Epaphroditus as slave name: BGU II 493 ii.6; BGU IV 1112.5; O. Wilck. 1482.1; P. Gen. II 62.32; P. Hamb. I 4.16; P. Lond. II 261.56 (p. 55), re-edited with a new fragment in SPP IV pp. 63–78, lines 56, 178, 300, 306, 315, 329, 361; P. Lond. II 280 (p. 193); P. Oslo III 111a.25; P. Oxy. III 475.21 *et seq.*; P. Ross. Georg. II 26.2; P. Sarap. 79e 2.2; SB VI 9017 nr. 30. Nero also had a freedman called Epaphroditus (Suetonius, *Nero* 49.3.10 and Tacitus, *Annals* XV 55.4).

3 My appreciation of P. Oxy. XLII 3070 has greatly benefited from discussion with Dr Jonathan Walters of Bristol University.

4 This is one of the principal arguments of Halperin (1990).

5 See, for instance, Thorp (1992) 57–61; Richlin (1993); Boswell in Duberman *et al* (1991) 17–36, vigorously argued against by Halperin and Padgug in the same work, 37–64.

6 Boswell in Duberman *et al* (1991) 35, though he does go on to modify this position.

7 The Coptic word is *refenkotekempehoût*: see Crum (1939) 225a. I owe this reference to T. G. Wilfong. I wonder whether this Coptic term demonstrates a way of thinking in terms of actions *per se* rather than categories in which the acts are defined.

8 Boswell in Duberman *et al* (1991) 30.

9 P. British Museum 10509 14.5; translation in Simpson (1973) 171. This meaning of this passage has been much debated; Goedicke (1967) 101 thinks that it is 'an admonition to abstain from making paederastic advances after meeting objections to the less serious homosexual sports', whatever that means. On homosexuality and Middle Kingdom literature see now Parkinson (1995), the first focused and theoretically engaged treatment of the subject.

10 See Griffiths (1960) 41–6.

11 Text translated from Griffith (1898) 28.

12 P. Chester Beatty I 11.2, translated from the text in Gardiner (1931).

13 Griffiths (1960) 43.

14 See further Barta (1992) 33–8, with detailed references.

15 Edition by Posener (1957) 119–36: the text translated here is on page 129.

16 See e.g. Polybius XIV 11.1: he is also criticised for showing his excessive devotion to the cult of Dionysus by being tattooed.

- 17 Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IV 49.1.
- 18 MacMullen (1982) 485.
- 19 Although it may be arguing *ex silentio*, it is interesting that there are no examples of such violence in the petitions on papyrus.
- 20 MacMullen (1982) 486. See also Griffin (1976).
- 21 For mosaics of Ganymede, see Daszewski (1985) 174–6 and plate 40b; Hippolytus is illustrated below, [Figure 16](#).
- 22 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* II 2.30.
- 23 Callimachus, *Hymn to Zeus* 65.
- 24 *Palatine Anthology* XII 148.
- 25 *Palatine Anthology* XII 43, translation by Lombardo and Rayor (1988): their rendering of the echo cleverly preserves a pun in the Greek.
- 26 There is an excellent discussion of this question by Gleason in Halperin *et al.* (1990) 390–415.
- 27 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 3.19.
- 28 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 15.2.
- 29 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 11. 69.
- 30 Phlegon of Tralles, fragment 36.26 = Jacoby (1925) 1184. This anecdote forms an interesting parallel to the myth of the impregnation of Seth by Horus: his impregnation is a sign of his ultimate passivity.
- 31 All references are to *Paedagogus*. Depilation: III 3.20; oiling: II 8.69; languid bearing and garments: II 10.105 and 114; groups and the frog-like noise: III 4.29.
- 32 Padgug in Duberman *et al.* (1991) 54.
- 33 *Cyranides* I 10.28 ff and io.49ff. The text edition used is that of Kaimakis (1976).
- 34 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* IV 5.187.
- 35 *Palatine Anthology* XII 206 and 222. For a heterosexual version, see the long sex scene with the significantly-named slave girl Palaestra, in Lucian's *Lucius, or the Ass* 9–10, which is entirely described in wrestling metaphors.
- 36 Revised text and commentary in Musurillo (1954) 33–43, 150–160: the *editio princeps* is P. Oxy. III 471. The accounts are slightly fictionalised, and as Musurillo suggests may even have been given as a dramatic performance, but certainly incorporate substantial parts of the actual speeches against Maximus. Boswell (1980) 30 completely misunderstands this text.
- 37 See [Chapter 2](#) above.
- 38 Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* III 11.74.
- 39 See Whitehorne (1979) 245; Bagnall (1993) 195–6 is rightly suspicious of his interpretation.
- 40 See Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IV 49.1–2; Origen, *Against Celsus* III 36–8 and V 63–4. Origen is particularly incensed by Celsus' comparison of Antinous with Christ, because both sacrificed themselves.
- 41 At Pompeii, homosexual graffiti were sometimes rubbed out by the people insulted in them: see Clarke in Gazda (1991) 94 and n.20.
- 42 Bernand (1969) no. 26 (Antmoopolis, third century CE).
- 43 Coptic text in Smither (1939) 173–4: a re-edition of this is forthcoming under the editorship of M. W. Meyer, director of the Coptic Magical Texts project at Claremont Graduate School, California. Although strictly speaking later than the Græco-Roman period, this spell includes all the standard elements of earlier love spells.
- 44 See Daniel (1991), who is doubtful of the homosexual intent of this spell.
- 45 Re-edited in Daniel and Maltomini II (1991) no. 54.
- 46 The placing of a discussion of Lesbianism last in this chapter implies no privileging of male homosexuality; it merely reflects the paucity of the sources for relationships between women.

- 47 First edition in PSI I 28; re-edited in Daniel and Maltomini I (1991) no. 42.
- 48 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblus* IV 5.187.
- 49 Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblus* III 14.171.
- 50 De Beauvoir (1972) 436.

Festivals of Licence

In the first century CE, the jaded Alexandrian in search of a little relaxation away from the stresses of urban life could have left the metropolis via the western gate and travelled along the canal that led to the town of Canopus, a journey of 120 *stadia* or about 14 miles. On the way to Canopus one would have passed the settlement of Eleusis, perhaps named after the great cult centre of Demeter in Attica, which was a prelude to the sensual delights to be found at Canopus itself. According to the geographer Strabo, who passed that way in about 25 BCE, Eleusis was a resort set up for pleasure:

Eleusis ... is situated on the Canopic canal itself, and has lodging-places and spectacular views for those wishing to have a good time, both men and women, and in fact it provides the first inkling of the 'Canopic life' and the excess (*lamyria*) that goes on there.¹

The 'Canopic life' was proverbial in antiquity for being consumption run amok;² it was thought to be a delirious orgy of drinking, dancing, music and sex indulged in by wealthy Alexandrians against the spectacular lush landscape of the Nile Delta (Plate 2). Read *in vacuo* ancient accounts of the 'Canopic life' sound suspiciously like sex holidays on Phuket Island, and indeed people did anticipate finding sex at Canopus; but a crucial element is different. As well as being a smart holiday resort, Canopus was one of the major cult centres of the god Sarapis. Strabo's account of the place makes clear the links between religion, festivals and sex, conjuring up a dizzy combination of Lourdes and St Tropez:

In the town is the sanctuary of Sarapis, who is worshipped with great reverence and brings about such cures that even the most famous people believe in them and sleep in his sanctuary, whether on their own behalf, or with others standing proxy. Some sources record the cures, others the excellence of the oracles there. Opposite to all this is the throng of festival-goers (*panêgyristôn*) who travel down from Alexandria by canal; every day and every night Canopus is

crowded with people on the boats who play the flute and dance unrestrainedly, with the greatest licentiousness (*akolasia*), both men and women, and also with the people of Canopus itself, who have places to stay close to the canal for the purpose of the same kind of relaxation and merry-making.

So the town of Canopus, according to Strabo, is geared up to facilitate sex, even to the extent of the local people providing places of assignation in suitable locations. But the point of Strabo's account is the way that it juxtaposes religion and festival observance with collective sexual release. The encounters one might expect at Canopus are transient, taking place in little gazebos by the canal, and are marked by excess, untrammelled by the normal constraints of domestic space. Strabo's vocabulary reflects this: he talks of *akolasia* and *lamyria*, licentiousness and excess, both opposites of the control that characterised Greek ideals of sexual behaviour. But all this sexual activity takes place in a strongly sacral context. The participants are festival-goers making a religious observance; the acts take place in a town dominated by one of the holiest and most numinous religious buildings in Egypt. To me, Strabo paints a vivid picture of the erotic effect of an emotionally-charged religious atmosphere on the collective mind. The pretty physical setting – the boats bobbing about on the canal, and their lights reflected in the water – conspires with the ecstatic elements of communal festive music, the singing, the dancing, the liberation from home, the relief of devotional duties fulfilled or cures received and, no doubt, the drink, to make Canopus the place to find sexual release within the parameters of cultic action.

The classical writers of Egypt frequently focus upon festivals to explore myths about the hypersexuality of the Egyptians. Charges of excessive libidinousness are, of course, among the standard ways in which imperialism tries to sublimate its fears about controlling subjugated cultures: one only has to recall American fictions of the mythic sexuality of the slave. Yet it is interesting to see how frequently classical authors collocate Egyptian festivals with sexual activity that has gone out of control. The Roman historian Tacitus, for instance, in his famous laconic sketch of the defining traits of Egypt, branded the province 'contentious and mercurial because of superstition and sexual licence' (*superstitione et lascivia discordent et mobilem*).³ His equation of the general Egyptian lack of discipline with religious observance and sexual activity is hard to miss. Later writers warm to the theme. A later scholar quoted Aristaenetus of Byzantium, a writer of the fourth or fifth century CE whose work is now lost, on the subject of the national celebrations in honour of the Nile flood. The later writer added a Christian gloss to Aristaenetus' words:

It is known from the historian Aristaenetus of Byzantium that in Egypt they hold a festival to the Nile. It is a public festival, when all the men and women go to the theatres in the cities, and once there each man and woman entertains himself with what is going on there. The men engage in dances and singing hymns to the Nile, and the women sing hymns to Osiris... In this way Aristaenetus seems to be praising these effeminate Egyptians, because in public the men behave like frenzied revellers together with the women, and often they get drunk and act licentiously.⁴

Two features characterise accounts of Egyptian festivals in classical writers. The first is that what goes on at them is excessive and unrestrained, be it eating, drinking, sex or all three at once. The second is that Egyptian festivals are mixed gatherings in which men and women participate equally. This was unlike Greek and some Roman religious practices, which split participants into demarcated groups, often on the basis of gender. The Egyptian lack of segregation provides the maximum opportunity for men and women to meet outside the home. With other boundaries broken down, sexual liaisons might well follow. However, it is one thing for individuals to get carried away with the freely-flowing drink in the relaxed festival atmosphere and have sex; sexual meanings being deeply embedded in the structure of religion and religious observance is quite another. Egyptian cosmogonies and myths about regeneration stressed the centrality of the sexual act. The annual inundation, honoured by the festival-goers in Aristaenetus' account, was metaphorised by Egyptian theologians as a human copulation on a grand scale. The Nile bursting its banks and pouring over the fields was compared to a lover mounting a woman and impregnating her.⁵ One personification of the fertility goddess Hathor was as the divine hand which masturbated the god Re-Atum, who emerged from the primordial mound. The semen spilt in this act engendered the gods who enabled life to come about on earth.⁶ At Edfu in the Ptolemaic period, a festival was held during which Hathor was presented with 'the phallus that caused to flourish what has been brought into being'. And actual sexual unions between gods, so-called hierogamies, lay at the heart of religious celebrations such as the Radiant Festival of the Wadi at Thebes. This was an extended festival when the cult image of Amun-Re from the great temple at Karnak crossed the Nile in his sacred barque to visit the deities in their shrines on the west bank. Among the ritual visits he paid was one to Hathor in her temple at Deir el-Bahri, with whose cult image the ithyphallic Amun-Re 'slept' in a sexual union. It seems probable that couples came and slept in or near the shrine of Hathor

on the festival night, hoping to share in the heightened sexual potency of the divine couple. Graffiti show that all classes of people, from priests to artisans, visited Hathor's temple during the Radiant Festival of the Wadi to pray and sacrifice to the goddess at this spiritually and sexually charged time.⁷

Part of what I intend to examine in this chapter is the possible psychological effect upon festival-goers of attending festivals where sex is the central religious motivation: in other words, the possibility that festivals were the times when people most keenly experienced themselves as sexual beings. In [Chapter 5](#), I speculated that men's patronage of prostitutes while attending the festival of the bull-god Buchis could, in a sense, be a way of mortals sharing in the sexual vitality of the god. However, here I shall place more emphasis on the role played by the sexuality of women at festivals. This seems to me to pose some interesting questions about the control and channelling of women's sexuality; about the relationship between women, sex and state ideology; and about the reactions of the female participants. In a sensitive discussion of Greek women's festivals such as the Thesmophoria and Adonia, Margaret Williamson argued that their view of women's sexuality is paradoxical. On the one hand, it is a powerful generative force which the festival seeks to control and channel for its own purpose; on the other, it is something which is potentially destructive if let loose. She goes on to say that Greek women might have had an awareness of the power attributed to their sexuality which, in the context of the festival at least, could have brought about a sense of empowerment in the women themselves. Even if only fleetingly, she writes, women 'were seen as a potentially powerful and independent group, and it is hard to imagine that they did not come away from such events with an enhanced sense of themselves and their sexual energies.'⁸ To what extent did Egyptian festivals function in this way?

Festivals and Women's Sexuality

Some indigenous Egyptian cults included rituals that seem to have overtly acknowledged women's sexual power. These were not confined to the world of private religion, where one might expect women's reproductivity to be a concern, but were also a part of national state cults which were crucial, in Egyptian terms, for the maintenance of cosmic order and royal power. One of these was the cult of the Apis bull at Saqqara, which was closely bound up with the dynastic ideology of the Ptolemies. The bull, a hypostasis of the creator-god Ptah, was found after a search all over Egypt. He was recognised by particular body markings, rather like the Dalai Lama.

Eventually the newly-found bull would be taken up to Memphis, to be installed in the temple of Ptah. Diodorus Siculus, who visited Egypt in the middle of the first century BCE, describes women's ritual involvement with the new Apis bull during a sort of quarantine period before his formal installation. Before the journey to the sanctuary of Ptah, in a state barque with a gilded cabin, the bull was kept at nearby Nilopolis for forty days:

During the forty days that I mentioned, only women may look at him. They stand, facing him, and, pulling up their clothes, display their genitals; but after this they are prevented from ever coming into the presence of the god again.⁹

It has often been suggested¹⁰ that this gesture of women exposing their genitals (sometimes called by the Greek term *anasyrmenê*) is a way of magically stimulating the virility of the god (Figure 11). Certainly the sexual vigour of the bull had an extraordinary longevity in the local folklore. When the archaeologist Auguste Mariette excavated a full-size statue of an Apis bull at Saqqara in 1851, local childless women spontaneously gathered to straddle the statue's back, so that the bulls fertility might be imparted to them.¹¹ In fact, stimulating the gods dormant sexual potency is far from the only possible meaning of the *anasyrmenê*. It could just as easily be that the women are channelling the potentially dangerous force of the gods sexuality, as in earlier Egyptian stories. In the *Contendings of Horns and Seth*, Hathor shows her genitals to her father Re when he is angry and sulking, so that his good-will might be restored.¹² Alternatively, the forty-day period during which women have access to the bull may be significant: it was for this amount of time that a new-born child remained in a dangerous liminal state while the mother was still polluted from the birth.¹³ If the new Apis was still thought to be ritually vulnerable, like a neonate, for forty days before his formal induction, then the women's self-exposure might have had an apotropaic effect.



Figure 11 Woman raising her skirts in the cultic gesture of *anasyrmenê*. (Ptolemaic terracotta in the Fouquet collection, after Perdrizet 1921, 55)

Women are also supposed to have exposed their reproductive organs at the Bubasteia, a festival honouring the cat goddess Bastet, tutelary deity of the Delta city of Bubastis (modern Zagazig). Although it was also a major state festival, its religious context was different from that of the Apis cult. During the Bubasteia, the cult images of certain gods left their shrines elsewhere in Egypt to sail up to the Delta and join in the great festival. The goddess Hathor, for instance, left her temple at Dendera in Upper Egypt and was conveyed north in her ceremonial barque-shrine. Both Hathor and Bastet had important roles as fertility

goddesses, and Bastet was closely linked with Hathor as one of her avatars. Herodotus gives a lively description of the journey to Bubastis, and one is to imagine grand processional boats carrying divine cult images on the river passing small crafts containing private groups of pilgrims. This is how the latter behave *en route*:

when the people are on their way to Bubastis, they go by river, men and women together, a great number of each in every boat. Some of the women make a noise with clappers, other play pipes all the way, while the rest of the women, and the men, sing and clap their hands. As they travel by river to Bubastis, whenever they come near any town, they bring their boat near the bank; then some of the women do as I have said, while some mock the women of the town, others dance, and others stand up and expose their genitals. They do this whenever they draw up beside a town. But when they reach Bubastis itself, they make a festival (*panêgyris*) with great sacrifices, and more wine is drunk at this feast than in the entire rest of the year.¹⁴

The pilgrimage to Bubastis contains the now familiar elements of communal singing, music and drinking in mixed company, but with the added ingredient of ritualised ribaldry. Women shouting obscenities was also a feature of the most important Athenian fertility festival, the Thesmophoria.¹⁵ This was an all-female, three-day event at which womens sexuality was publicly acknowledged by the city to be indivisible from its own reproduction as an entity. Women, however briefly, were able to leave their homes to indulge in the kind of behaviour which at other times would be unsanctionable, including lewd talk and getting drunk. I would suggest that a comparable interpretation of the Bubasteia might be possible: that it inscribes female sexuality on the maintenance of cosmic order and the political status quo. In 238 BCE the Ptolemies had tinkered with the traditional dates of the Bubasteia to make it coincide with a new festival of the ruler cult, the *Euergesia*, which fêted Ptolemy III and his consort Berenice II as ‘benefactors’ (*euergetoi*) of the Egyptian state.¹⁶ The Bubasteia now took place on the first of Payni, the day when the rising of the star Sothis (= Sirius), harbinger of the Nile flood, was celebrated. By coalescing the traditional festivals of the inundation and the fertility goddess Bastet with a new feast in honour of his ruling dynasty, Ptolemy III was able to display symbolically his own hegemony in front of the largest possible audience: divine and mortal, local and cosmic. And, as Herodotus makes clear, the sexuality of women was an integral part of the festival activity.

The festivals that have been looked at so far are major celebrations

connected with state cults. Less formal, private festivals could still contain sexual components.¹⁷ Perhaps the best example is the Adonia, held in honour of Adonis at the height of the summer heat in late July. The Adonia was certainly celebrated in Egypt, but evidence for it is limited,¹⁸ and more is known about it from elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Like the Bubasteia, it coincided with the rising of the dog-star Sothis. It seems to have been relatively informal and organised by the women themselves. Respectable unmarried women and even prostitutes apparently participated equally, and men could join in too. The principal ritual act of the Adonia was to plant seeds in pots which were taken up onto the flat roofs of houses. The plants were allowed to bloom and sprout for a while, but then left to become parched and die, in remembrance of Adonis, the youth loved by Aphrodite who symbolised the dying back of the spring vegetation with the summer heat. Celebrating the Adonia at the time when the inundation was awaited in Egypt gave the festival an added relevance to fertility and, by extension, sexuality. Socialising, however, seems to have been the most important consideration. Women would get together on the rooftops to eat, drink and dance, where they might be joined by men, and there might be opportunities for sexual dalliance.

This is apparently the situation evoked in some fragments of a prose romance by Lollian, found at Oxyrhynchus and probably dating to the second century CE.¹⁹ Unfortunately the relevant passage is very mutilated, and no consecutive translation is possible. A number of men and women are dining and dancing together on a flat roof of a house, which makes it likely that the festival is the Adonia. Everybody is rather drunk, and some male servants have to eject the guests who are getting too rowdy. In the next fragment, the narrative shifts to a couple called Androtimus and Persis. They withdraw into a private room in the house and dismiss the servants. One of the two, it is not clear which, loses their virginity, but since the woman Persis seems to be the protagonist in the story, she might be seducing Androtimus. After sex, for some reason Persis insists on trying to give Androtimus her jewellery, which he refuses: she then tries to press him to take 2000 drachmas from her. Then they make love repeatedly till dawn. The scene seems to conclude with the entry of Persis' mother, and the couple trying to explain to her what had happened.

Apart from literature (and one must always be wary of using it as a source for reconstructing sexual life), one or two documentary papyri give an impression of what the experience of attending the Adonia and similar festivals might have been like. They suggest that events may not have been totally unlike Lollian's fictional description. A third century BCE account (P. Petr. III 142) lists expenditure on various expensive luxury items for the Adonia, including two kinds of

nuts imported from Greece and the Black Sea, fresh and dried figs, olive oil, sausages, fowls and, of course, wine. Obviously a good time was to be had by all. Far more suggestive is a letter (P. Hibeh I 54) written by Demophon to his subordinate Ptolemaius in c. 245 BCE:

Send us, by whatever means, the flute-player Petous with the Phrygian flutes and the other kinds of flutes. If you have to lay out any money to him, do so and you shall get it back from us. Send us also Zenobius the entertainer (*malakos*) with his drum and cymbals and clappers – he is required by the women for the festival. Be sure that he is dressed as finely as possible. Also get the kid from Aristion and send it to us . . . send us also as many cheeses as you are able, a new jar, any kind of vegetable and whatever relishes you may have. Put them on board the boat with the guards, who will accompany it.

The word used to describe Zenobius, *malakos* (literally ‘soft’), is another term like *kinaidos* which connects effeminacy and the entertainment business. Presumably he was some kind of exotic dancer, perhaps a transvestite or even a eunuch, who was safe to allow into an all-female gathering because he posed no sexual threat. In spite of this, it is difficult not to see the whole situation as erotically charged. The picture of the splendidly commodified dancer in his fine clothes, thrashing around to his own percussion accompaniment while the women revellers clap along in time, sounds like a riotous girls’ night out with the Chippendales – is one to imagine Demophon’s wife and her cohorts stuffing drachma pieces into Zenobius’ posing pouch? It is unfortunate that Demophon does not state for which festival the women required Zenobius’ attendance. It might have been some major state cult like the Thesmophoria, or perhaps a private festival determined by women’s life-crisis rites. Whatever it was, and whatever its sexual function may have been, it is interesting to see Demophon so closely involved with its organisation. He is willing to go to some trouble and expense to make the women’s sacrifices go with a swing. As with the Bubasteia and the Athenian Thesmophoria, if the licentious behaviour of women takes place within the cultic framework, it is temporarily acceptable to men.

Phallic Rituals

I want now to turn, briefly, to men, and the distinguishing and unequivocal mark of manhood, the phallus. There is no doubt that rituals involving the processional carrying of phalli and their deposit went on in Egypt. Once again, the classical authors use phallic rites as

a means of setting up Egypt as a barbarian and bestial ‘other’. With the adoption of Christianity, such rituals were a gift to the antipagan panegyrists. The church father Lactantius, writing in the fourth century CE, coyly talks about Egyptian phallic rituals in the same breath as animal cults, the most problematic area of Egyptian religion for Greeks and Romans and a regular focus for their xenophobia:

Nobody is worse . . . than that nation of Egyptians, who worship the very lowest kinds of animal and even images of cattle; they also adore as gods certain things which shame forbids me to mention. What is even worse, these people who describe themselves as worshipping such gods, nonetheless deride them publicly and in the most shameful way, and even allow actors to make performances about them with mockery and filth.²⁰

In so far as Lactantius was referring to a specific god at all, the most likely candidates are either Osiris or Bes. Before the Græco-Roman period, phallic worship in Egyptian religion tended to be concentrated on Osiris and Min. Later, however, Bes (see [Figure 3](#)) becomes important as a phallic god, perhaps because the Greeks found him reminiscent of phallic deities in their own religion, like Priapus and Silenus. The sort of processions described by Lactantius seem to be represented by a number of Roman period terracottas, some of which come from a sanctuary at Saqqara. These typically depict two priests and two figures of Bes (or, more probably, priests wearing Bes-costumes) carrying in procession an enormous phallus. On top of this sits a dwarfish or childish figure of Harpocrates, the son of Isis and Osiris, with some small, indeterminate, creature on his shoulder, possibly a monkey, which have phallic associations in Egyptian iconography. Some scholars²¹ think that these figures are connected with rites of ancestor worship within the family. The idea behind them may have been that the family would be regenerated by the sexual potency of the ancestors in the same way that the phallus of Osiris could magically impregnate Isis after his death and beget Horus (see [Figure 5](#)). At any event, some link between these figures and the cult of the phallic Osiris seems likely. A phallic procession of Osiris is alluded to by Plutarch, who calls it the Pamylyia.²² He connected it with agriculture and thought that the display of Osiris’ phallus, whose magical potency could transcend even his murder and dismemberment, fertilised the earth. He linked the Pamylyia with his theory about the efflux of the butchered Osiris as the source of life-giving moisture, symbolising the inundation. Herodotus goes into more detail about phallic processions of Osiris, whom he equates with the ithyphallic form of Dionysus:

The Egyptians organise the festival of Dionysus in much the same way as the Greeks do, except that there are no dances. Instead of the phalli, they have invented figures moved by strings about a cubit high [about 45 cm.], which the women carry through the villages, with the genitals swaying and nearly as big as the rest of the figure. A flute-player precedes them, and the women follow, singing a hymn to Dionysus.²³

Herodotus and Plutarch emphasise the parallels between phallic symbolism and agricultural fertility. This may well be correct, especially since Egyptian imagery about crop regeneration tends to be masculine, the earth being personified as a god. However, this may only be part of the picture. Numerous phallic objects from various sites across Egypt witness the fact that the phallus was an important symbol in other rituals, but the archaeological evidence is difficult to interpret, for a number of reasons. The prudery of early excavators led to shrines of phallic cults being inadequately recorded, or them misconstruing the data according to their own prejudices: phalli were assumed to be from a late and ‘decadent’ period of history by scholars fixated on the New Kingdom as the apogee of Egyptian culture.²⁴ These problems are exemplified by the Græco-Roman terracotta phallus illustrated in Plate 13. It has no secure archaeological context, though it is known to have come from Memphis. However, the manufacture of the object has a certain amount to say about itself. It has been carefully mould-made in two halves, there are traces of red paint on the exposed glans, and it is a realistic length of 17 cm. The workmanship is better than in older examples, such as the New Kingdom wooden votive phalli recovered from one of the shrines of Hathor at Deir el-Bahri.²⁵ The shape of the object, carefully tapered towards the root end, suggests that the phallus may have been intended to be inset into something, or perhaps held upright in the hand – it fits perfectly into a fist. The shape and the careful manufacture all suggest that this was a votive offering.

Even divorced from its provenance and context, this phallus can still contribute to the search for the emotional meaning of attending a religious festival in Egypt. If the phallus was a votive object, it represented an actual incident in somebody’s life: it could be a thank-offering to a god for a favour bestowed, or a plea to have some dysfunction made right. Whatever the circumstances, one should think of the donor’s personal involvement in buying the object, in journeying to present it at the shrine, in the accompanying prayers, and perhaps in personalising it with his or her own bodily exuviae.²⁶ When writing history, particularly ancient history, it is easy to forget that one is dealing with the real lives and feelings of real people.

Festival-Goers

Festivals recur in personal letters on papyrus as punctuation marks in people's lives. They are eagerly anticipated, and complex preparations are made for them. Letters look forward to the sensual and emotional pleasures that festivals offered: dining, drinking, wearing new clothes, reunions with loved ones. In a fourth-century CE letter (P. Oxy. XLVII 3406), Clematia instructs her caretaker Papnuthis to 'collect from Paymis for the festival two jars of honey, as well as the honey-cakes, and collect from Pagas the wool', presumably to make new garments. The non-arrival of an expected festival guest could cause keen disappointment. In a bantering yet reproachful letter (P. Oxy. LV 3812), Eunoios says to Horigenes:

At the sweet New Year festival, when honey should have been sent – but it is no sweeter than you! – you were neglectful in this respect also, and although we were expecting you for New Year, you have left your fellow-diners dinnerless. I write this to you during the festival, by way of a joke, but reminding you of your affection for us.

Perhaps Horigenes' travel arrangements to Oxyrhynchus for New Year had gone awry. Anxiety about the mechanics of getting to festivals is mentioned often in private letters.²⁷ The dangers and uncertainties of travelling would have added another emotional dimension to the whole festival experience. This is most clearly expressed in visitors' graffiti at the remote shrine of the phallic god Min, equated with the Greek Pan, at el-Kanaïs in the desert west of Edfu. The pilgrims thank Pan *euholdos*, the protector of wayfarers, for delivering them from the very real dangers of the journey – wild animals, Bedouin attacks.²⁸ Carved onto the rocks surrounding the temple are numerous ithyphallic figures of Pan (see Plate 14). In front of these images, the visitors made a ritual act of obeisance called a *proskynema*: they literally prostrated themselves before his phallus. Whether the priapic depictions of Pan had any effect on the relief felt by the travellers at reaching the shrine safely is a matter for speculation. It should not be forgotten that Pan himself lies at the root of the word *panic*. His shrine at el-Kanaïs is certainly an extraordinarily awe-inspiring and numinous place, hewn out of a towering bluff of rock in a barren desert wadi. It is easy to believe that the combination of the desert location, the strain of the journey and the ritual obeisance to the phallic god could have prompted the visitor to feel 'Stendahl's syndrome' – a sense of ecstasy coupled with regret and fear when confronted with places of great potency and majesty.²⁹

Like Adela Quested visiting the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India*, pilgrims to el-Kanaïs could have experienced the same feelings of sex-charged dread.

If travelling was fraught with so many dangers, practical and emotional, it made sense only to travel for the longer celebrations. Some holidays were quite extended, and might continue for as long as ten days at a stretch. Accounts of expenditure on festivals give an idea of the junketings. The house or other festal space was wreathed with scented garlands, special foods and wine were bought, people wore their best clothes, and sometimes dancers and entertainers were hired. As I suggested in [Chapter 5](#), it is quite possible that these dancers and musicians, not all of whom were women, provided sexual services as well. It is even possible to read an awareness of the dancers' erotic potential into the formulaic hiring contracts, which sometimes specify that the women are to make themselves as attractive as possible, bringing their jewellery and dancing costumes with them. In one contract (SB V 7557) of 206 CE, Artemisia from Philadelphia, a village in the Fayyum, hired a castanet-dancer called Isidora to come with another dancer to perform at her house for six days starting on 24 Payni for a remuneration of 36 drachmas per day, plus four artabas of barley and 34 pairs of bread loaves:

And on condition further that if garments or gold ornaments are brought down, we will hold them in safekeeping, and that we will supply you with two donkeys when you come down from the metropolis, and a like number when you return to the city.

One can only speculate as to the appearance of Isidora's costume, but it is not hard to imagine that the tinkling of the dancer's jewellery, her movements and the music, would have provided a powerful erotic stimulus for some spectators. Festival entertainers could even have a fatal attraction, as shown by this report of an accident (P. Oxy. III 475) that happened at the village of Senepta in November 182 CE:

To Hierax, strategus, from Leonides ... of Senepta. Late yesterday evening, namely 6th Hathyr, while a festival was taking place at Senepta and the castanet dancers were giving their usual performance at the house of my son-in-law Ploution [. . .] his slave Epaphroditus, aged about 8, tried to lean out of an upper room of the said house to see the castanet dancers, fell, and was killed.

At larger-scale public celebrations the festival-goers could have watched plays and dramas provided by the city or a local benefactor.

The entertainment provided at these ran the gamut, from recitations of Homer, athletic displays and tight-rope dancing, to crudely humorous farces. One of the most interesting of these is the so-called Charition mime (P. Oxy. III 413), essentially a bawdy pastiche of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. 'On the stage [it] may have been amusing enough even without the coarser elements,' observed Grenfell and Hunt in their introduction to the text. The papyrus, as always, is damaged, but what remains shows that the piece started with a barrage of scatological jokes, including a prayer to the goddess of fart to blow the trapped Greeks away from the land of the barbarians. Then the barbarian huntswomen arrive, presumably wearing suitable attire. 'Ooh! Look at their great big – bows!' comments the play's buffoon as they enter. In a punning exchange with the heroine Charition, the clown observes that the huntswomen are 'the daughters of piggies (*choiridiôn*)' and asks if he should drive them off to water at the river Psolichus? Rude slang is hidden here: *choiridiôn* is a synonym for the female genitalia, and the name of the river is derived from the word for an erection, *psôle*. It is not difficult to imagine festival-goers guffawing at such badinage. Perhaps on the same occasion, they could have watched the play preserved on the other side of the same papyrus, a dramatic monologue about a murderous wife who poisons her husband and attempts to seduce her slave. Dramatic performances with sexual themes may well have been a part of the whole festival experience.

Apart from the prostitution tax receipts discussed in [Chapter 5](#), documents are silent about actual sexual encounters in a festival context. But literary papyri confirm that their characteristic licence and lack of constraint provided an ideal atmosphere for erotic experience. Girls who lose their virginities at night festivals are standard characters in comic dramas. The theme may have developed from conditions of female segregation at Athens: night festivals would have been the only time that women could go about unchaperoned. The loss of virginity under the cloak of darkness is a very handy plot device which sets up all kinds of possible situations: a father's wrath, the pathos of the wronged girl, the transient lover who turns out to be somebody else, possibly the exposure of an illegitimate child who will eventually be recognised. However, these must have been at least comprehensible to people in Græco-Roman Egypt. A festival seduction is the subject of a dramatic composition, partially preserved on a third century CE papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (P. Lond. Lit 52).³⁰ The piece would probably have been acted by a single performer, who took on all the roles herself. The characters are uncertain: there is a young woman, her father, her brother, an old female servant and perhaps some other women. The situation seems to be that the young woman

is about to break down after being questioned by the nurse and the women, apparently over some sexual misdemeanour, because she says to them, 'Don't insult my character (*tropos*, which also means 'way of life') so indiscriminately, you mad women!' She is distressed, and the nurse tries to comfort her, telling her that she need not fear anybody, though some of her comments are obscure because of the lack of context:

Stop lamenting and speak to me, girl;
Is it that you are in love?
Tell me your pain, child, and have no fear of me.
If a god's in your heart, then you do nothing wrong.
Your father's no beast, he's a kind fellow.
Perhaps your young man is handsome; and you are
pretty, too.

Is the young woman pregnant and the nurse suggesting that she has been impregnated by a god? The girl is then persuaded to speak about her lover(s):

He revels like mad, and he drinks too much,
It inflames his desire for the tawdriest love.
And, to the sound of the sleepless flute's cries,
The boy made advances to me, alone.
And I let him – but he was the briefest fling, father!
But I knew another man, another [youth]
At the all-night festival [. . .]

Infuriatingly, the passage breaks off just as she is about to give some details of her sexual goings-on in the dark at all-night festivals. The dénouement of the piece may have been that the lover turned out to be the man she was in love with anyway. At any event, the passage makes clear the possibilities for sex facilitated by the drinking and music at festival times, when young people were out of the house and unchaperoned. The piece may also reflect the general Egyptian lack of moral concern about the sexual behaviour of unmarried people. But one must not forget that the all-night festival (*pannychis*) was still in essence a religious celebration. Perhaps the best evocation of how these events inextricably melded sensual and religious feelings is in a fragmentary poem by the Alexandrian Callimachus.³¹ At his *pannychis*, the presiding divinities of music and love are present in a human world of sensual gratification:

Apollo is present at the dance; I hear the sound of his
lyre,

And I sense the Cupids and Aphrodite herself [. . .]
Darling [. . .] he who madly joins the all-night dance,
Staying awake till the crown of dawn comes,
Receives a prize of honey-cakes for playing *kottabos*:³²
And he may kiss whom he wants of the girls,
And whomever he wants of the boys [. . .]

Conclusions

All the evidence shows that festivals were an important ingredient of the emotional lives of Egyptians in the Græco-Roman period. Sexuality was a part of the festival experience and could manifest itself in various ways, from general gratification of the senses to actual sexual activity. ‘How it was for them’ is, of course, impossible to reconstruct, but it is necessary to remember how festivals were special and different from the rest of life. Taking place in differently constituted space, they transcended normal boundaries, and enabled people to take part in collective behaviour which at other times was not permissible. Some festivals, like the Bubasteia or the Radiant Festival of the Wadi, honoured myths or religious principles encoded in sexual acts. More private and personal feasts were determined by the sexual maturation of individuals. This emotional investment in the festal occasion was intensified by the physical and sensual surroundings, the music, communal singing, dancing and eating. It is easy to imagine how all these layers of sexual meanings, coupled with the supranormal festival time and space, imparted a powerful set of emotions to the festival-goer: and thus it was at communal events, as much as in private intercourse, that some people enjoyed their strongest physical and spiritual fulfilment.

1 Strabo XVII 1.16.

2 See, for instance, Silius Italicus, *Punic War* XI 425–31; Statius, *Silvae* III 2.111; Ovid, *Amores* II 13.6–7; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* XIII 596 B; Juvenal XV 44–46.

3 Tacitus, *Histories* I 11.

4 Text in Muller (1883) 320.

5 See, for instance, the hymn to the Nile from Sehel, translated in [Chapter 1](#).

6 Egyptian creation myths are discussed by Lesko in Shafer (1991) 88–113, who stresses their relative coherence and strong relationship with governmental structure. For Hathor as the divine hand, see Pinch (1993) 243–5.

7 Pinch (1993) 244–5; she discusses other sexual meanings of the Radiant Festival of the Wadi in the Pharaonic period on 157. The festival was still going on as late as 117 BCE, and was known to Diodorus Siculus, who mentions the sacred union of Amun and Hathor (II 97.9).

8 Williamson (1995) 108: on this point see also Sennett (1994) 68–80.

9 Diodorus Siculus I 85.

- 10 E.g. Manniche (1987) 10. A good account of the Apis cult is given by Thompson (1988) 188–207, and its relationship to the Ptolemaic ruler cult is discussed on 112–38. The same act is also attested at Esna, though here it seems to have taken place before the cult statue of Hathor.
- 11 Maspero (1882) 30.
- 12 See P Chester Beatty I 3.13–4.3: translated in Simpson (1973) 112.
- 13 Discussed in [Chapter 2](#).
- 14 Herodotus II 60.
- 15 For discussion, see Winkler (1990) 188–98.
- 16 See Thompson 1988) 133–4; feasts of the Ptolemaic ruler cult are discussed generally by Perpillou-Thomas (1993) 151–64. Berenicê II was deified and assimilated to Tefnut, the goddess of moisture begotten from the masturbation of Re-Atum, which may have added another sexual element to the festival.
- 17 The evidence for festivals determined by sexual maturation has already been surveyed in [Chapter 2](#).
- 18 See Perpillou-Thomas (1993) 65–6. Detienne (1977) sets up the Adonia in opposition to the Thesmophoria, as a celebration of short-lived pleasure against long-term productive work: Winkler (1990) 198 disagrees.
- 19 Translated by Sandy in Reardon (1989) 810–12, with bibliography
- 20 Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* V 20.12.
- 21 Martin (1981) 170, though Pinch (1993) 240 points out that phallic objects are rarely found in Egyptian tombs. An exquisite glass bottle shaped like a phallus was found in the grave of a young woman at Hawara, along with other erotic or fertility symbols: see Petrie (1911) plate XVI.
- 22 Plutarch, Concerning *Isis and Osiris* 355 E, 365 B: for discussion, see Griffiths (1970) 299.
- 23 Herodotus II 48.
- 24 See further Martin (1987); Pinch (1993) 235.
- 25 Illustrated in Pinch (1993) 235–7 and plates 52 A and 53.
- 26 See Pinch (1993) 340.
- 27 E.g. P. Oxy. III 525 (travelling north from the Antaeopolite nome to Oxyrhynchus for a night- festival of Isis); P. Oxy. I 112 (travelling to Oxyrhynchus, perhaps for the birthday of Osiris). All these letters are third century CE.
- 28 See Bernand (1972) *passim*. On the el-Kanaïs temple, see Bernand (1977).
- 29 On ‘Stendahls syndrome’ among tourists in Egypt, see Foertmeyer (1989) 260–61.
- 30 The translation given here incorporates the suggestions by Knox (1929) 141, who reconstructs a different text to that of Sel. Pap. III 79.
- 31 Callimachus, fragment 227.
- 32 *Kottabos* was a game played at men’s drinking-parties, which involved throwing the dregs of ones wine cup at a target, usually a metal dish. It had erotic connotations: as the cup was emptied, one was supposed to call out the name of one’s beloved, and the different sounds made by the dregs could be interpreted to tell one’s standing with him or her. Prizes were sometimes awarded for the most accurate throws.

[8]

Sex Magic

Græco-Roman Egypt And The Occult

The historian Ammianus Marcellinus, writing at the end of the fourth century CE, summed up one late Antique view of Egypt's religio-intellectual heritage and its effect on the cultures which had encountered it:

If anyone with an attentive mind wishes to examine the many publications on the knowledge of the diviner and the origin of divination, he will find that learning of this kind has spread abroad throughout the whole world from Egypt. There, for the first time, long before other races, they discovered the cradles, so to speak, of the various religions, and now they carefully guard the first beginnings of worship stored up in secret writings ... Plato drew on this source and, after traversing their higher regions of thought, served gloriously in the field of wisdom.¹

Plato is only one of several intellectual giants cited by Ammianus as being profoundly influenced by Egyptian thought: he later refers to Solon, the philosopher Pythagoras and the natural scientist Anaxagoras. Ammianus is not alone in this opinion. In Herodotus, Lucian, Pliny and many other classical writers, Egypt appears as the awesome font of an arcane knowledge of immense antiquity, and its priests as guardians of a profound esoteric mysticism. As Ammianus hints, however, this is only one side of the coin. Along with these authors' respect for some aspects of Egypt's culture and its antiquity went a hearty distaste for other aspects of it. The Egyptians' worship of animal-headed gods comes in for special opprobrium, as does their supposed superstitiousness and credulous belief in magic and oracles.² In about 198 CE, a præfect of Egypt circulated this pronouncement (P. Coll. Youtie I 30)³ about occult matters to a group of district governors:

Encountering many who believed themselves to be deceived

by the practices of divination, I quickly considered it necessary, in order that no danger should ensue upon their foolishness, clearly herein to enjoin all people to abstain from this hazardous inquisitiveness. Therefore let no man through oracles, that is, by means of written documents supposedly granted under divine influence, nor by means of the parade of images or suchlike charlatanry, pretend to know things beyond human perception and profess (to know) the obscurity of things to come.

The realities behind this edict seem clear. Consultation of the 'occult' is a normal part of life. It is probable that these official injunctions had very little practical effect, and the prejudice that engendered them was born out of ignorance. Neither Herodotus, Lucian nor the Roman governor learned the indigenous Egyptian language or had access to the 'mystic' books kept in Egyptian temples, and thus their knowledge was second-hand. But a manifestation of one aspect of Egyptian religious belief visible on the streets of the great cities of the Græco-Roman world: the itinerant Egyptian practitioner of what might be loosely termed the magic arts, particularly divination and horoscope-casting. These practitioners are regularly encountered in literature. The satirist Juvenal, never an advocate of the Egyptians, pokes fun at how a woman's credulity is exploited by Egyptian astrologers: 'if she's ill in bed, she'll only take nourishment at such times as Petosiris the Egyptian may recommend' (Satire VI 582). The wonder-worker Apollonius of Tyana expelled from the cities of the Hellespont various fraudulent Egyptian magicians who were collecting money on the pretence of being able to avert the earthquakes that plagued the region.⁴ A tragicomic story within a story in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (II 25) records an encounter with an Egyptian magician at Larissa in Thessaly, itself an area well known for its witches. In this episode an old man is trying to establish the truth about a suspicious death:

'let us leave the judgement of truth to divine providence. Here is Zatchlas, an Egyptian necromancer who, for a considerable fee, has made an agreement to bring briefly the spirit of the young man from the underworld and to revive his body.' As he said this he brought forward a young man in linen robes, with palm-leaf sandals on his feet, his head completely shaven. The old man kissed his hands repeatedly and touched his knees, and then said: 'Reverend sir, have mercy, have mercy! I implore you by the stars of heaven, by the gods of the underworld, by the elements of nature, by the silence of the night and the hidden things of Coptus and the flooding of the

Nile and the mysteries of Memphis and the sacred rattles of Pharos! Grant the dead man a brief moment of the light!

Here Apuleius makes the old man from Thessaly locate the Egyptian religious mysteries on a cosmic scale. The local cult of Isis at Coptus is placed on the same level as the movement of the stars and the forces of nature. Of course, there is an element of flattery in the old man's words to Zatchlas, but there is a stronger element of awe as well. The necromancer, equipped with all the arcane knowledge of Egyptian cultic ritual, has powers that put him on the same cosmic plane as his knowledge. The message of the tale is that with this knowledge, Egyptian practitioners can do unimaginable things, such as revive the dead, and potentially they also have important and portentous things to communicate. Hence a 'curriculum of occult sciences'⁵ grew up in Egypt during the Græco-Roman period, whereby long-standing Egyptian practices were adopted, modified, systematised and disseminated. Several magical techniques in use all over the Hellenistic and Roman world seem to have had Egyptian origins. Places as far afield as Athens and Bath have yielded examples of curse tablets or *defixiones*, whereby a text is written addressing the underworld powers and requesting them to do something to a specific victim. Then the text is put in some appropriately chthonic place: a well, cemetery, even the mouth of a corpse. These *defixiones* are adaptations to the private sphere of the ancient Egyptian practice of publicly execrating state enemies so that they may be destroyed.⁶

The two anecdotes from Juvenal and Apuleius illustrate the polarised view that the classical authors tend to take of Egyptian occult activity: on the one hand, there is the cosmic and awesome, like Zatchlas the resurrector, while on the other hand there is the more mundane and possibly dubious, like Petosiris and his dietetic advice to the hypochondriac. The idea that pseudo-Egyptian arcana of whatever kind can help practically with one's daily life has had a long currency and, partly because of the Arabic tradition of translating, a wide influence in western Europe. For example, a papyrus prescription for catching a thief by choking is repeated almost verbatim in an episode of the *Decameron*.⁷ There is also the anonymous (and spurious) *Napoleon's Book of Fate ... now first rendered into English from an Ancient Egyptian Manuscript found in the year 1801 by M. Sonnini in one of the Royal Tombs near Mount Libyens in Upper Egypt* (1821), and reprinted in America as late as 1927 (see Plate 15). The *Book of Fate*, as its 'translator' asserted in the Preface, 'is adapted to all conditions of life; and persons of every rank and capacity will now have an opportunity of consulting it and of regulating their future conduct according to its ORACULAR COUNSELS.' Ironically, the *Book of Fate*

really did have an Egyptian origin in the so-called ‘oracle book’ of Astrampsychus. This work consisted of 91 standard questions – ‘Am I to be separated from my wife?’ – with sets of corresponding answers – ‘You are not to be reconciled with your wife’ – which the enquirer reached by an arithmetical computation. The book was probably composed in Egypt in the third century CE: several fragments of it have been found on papyri,⁸ and many of the questions relate to personal life, particularly marriage and relations between husband and wife. Sexual life, which is difficult to control, is one area where the occult can be thought to be of the greatest efficacy, and the magical papyri and other occult works extant from Græco-Roman Egypt offer the clearest glimpse into the sexual preoccupations of the people that can be hoped for. But to what extent can one really talk of the concept of magic in Græco-Roman Egypt? However familiar the Egyptian occult might seem to us from its remarkable *Nachleben*, ‘magic’ is not a term of universal applicability that means the same thing or has the same function in any given society.

E. Wallis Budge, one of the first modern scholars to think seriously about Egyptian magic, wrote in 1899:

When we consider the lofty spiritual character of the greater part of the Egyptian religion, and remember its great antiquity, it is hard to understand why the Egyptians carefully preserved in their writings and ceremonies so much which savoured of gross and childish superstition ... a matter for surprise is that they seem to see nothing incongruous in such a mixture of magic and religion.⁹

Much subsequent writing on Egyptian magic has followed the method of Budge by separating these two areas of religious practice as though they were discrete and differentiable, and early theorists like Sir James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, and Bronislaw Malinowski, provided an anthropological rationale for the bifurcation between religion and magic. Frazer, for instance, based the distinction on the attitude of the celebrants: with magic they were seeking to coerce or constrain via the correct ritual action, whereas with religion they were dependent on a divine will they sought to propitiate.¹⁰ Malinowski also made man the primary focus of magic, and suggested that magic is resorted to when problems beyond the technological limits of the given society are encountered.¹¹ However, these approaches do not accommodate a basic but pervasive paradox of Egyptian thought: that there is no inherent contradiction in the juxtaposition of things that seem absolutely contradictory. The sun-god can at the same time be self-created or brought into being by a goddess, and either of these origins for him could be equally valid within their own context.

Therefore it is impossible to translate 'Egyptian thoughts into modern language, for the distinctions we cannot avoid making did not exist for the Egyptians,'¹² and consequently using the term 'magic' at all requires some justification when talking about Græco-Roman Egypt. Conceptual differences aside, 'magic' now has connotations of subversion, surreptition, illegality and charlatanry, and an uninformed reading of the magical papyri might seem to underscore this. The setting for these spells is typically at night, on a rooftop, or in a cemetery or bath-house; their consonantal invocations to the spirits read like unpronounceable gibberish, and their pharmacopoeia employs a range of items associated with taboo, such as human body parts, dog excrement or menstrual blood. In fact, magic had no transgressive overtones in Græco-Roman Egypt. There it was something normative, part of a religious system which always offered you a reliable procedure for getting what you wanted, and also allowed for the system going wrong. If the magic did fail, no doubt there were good ritual reasons why it had done so.

A broader approach to the study of magic in Græco-Roman Egypt might prove to be more fruitful. In the anthropological classic *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, E. Evans-Pritchard demonstrated how magic can be treated as 'a function of personal relations' and 'a function of situations of misfortune' -that is, to provide a possible explanation for misfortune and a method of conceptualising social relations. Among the Zande, 'it is so intertwined with everyday happenings that it is a part of a Zande's ordinary world.'¹³ As implied by the papyrus with the præfect's attempt to ban magical consultations, quoted above, magic in all its forms played a part in sustaining the moral system and social codes in Egypt. It certainly was not any form of deviant behaviour, but something that was embedded in the status quo and orthodox theology.¹⁴ Heka, the god who might be said to personify magical power in all its manifestations, was not a shadowy nocturnal numen. At the temple of Esna in the Græco-Roman period, Heka was one of the chief co-templar deities with Khnum, associated with him as a member of the local divine triad, and honoured by a public procession of his cult image on 22 Hathyr, late in November. The date is significant, and indicative of the god's importance: Hathyr was the month after the final relapse of the unundation, the month when the sowing of cereal crops started in earnest. Parading the god of magic through the fields in the month of Hathyr is a statement of his visibility and potency in ensuring agricultural fertility and this the regeneration of the community.

Magical practices may also be interpreted as reinforcing the established order on a more private level. Take as examples these two

spells, written on papyrus in the fourth century CE:

Love spell of attraction through sleeplessness. Gouge out the eyes of a bat and release it alive, and take a piece of unbaked dough or unmelted wax and mould a little dog... and put the dog into a new drinking-vessel, attach a papyrus strip to it... and deposit it at a crossroads. (PGM IV 2943–56, excerpted).

If you wish someone to appear unattractive, whether a woman to a man or a man to a woman, take a dog's excrement and put it in the post hole of their door, repeating the Sacred Name three times and saying, 'I sever X from Y' (PGM XIII 240–2).

Thus the two spells, one to attract and one to repel, use the same means to obtain their ends: sympathetic magic, close association of action, word and text, and the burial of the magical object in a spiritually-charged liminal area. It may seem paradoxical that the same means are used both to induce love and to induce separation and hatred, but the fact that they do introduces an important aspect of Egyptian so-called 'love' spells: they have nothing to do with the notions of mutuality and consent that are now associated with love, but are primarily to do with gaining control over the emotions and reactions of the victim, and with forcing the victim to submit to something, often something sexual, irrespective of his or her own wishes. Therefore the 'love' or 'passion' or 'physical desire' engendered by such magical methods is qualitatively no different from the 'hate' or 'repulsion.' The victims of both are to become emotional zombies, without capacity for independent thought and totally subordinate to the desire of the practitioner, as this ritual illustrates:

Marvellous love spell of attraction, than which none is greater. Take myrrh and male frankincense, put them in a drinking-cup and add a [measure] of vinegar, and at the third hour of the night put it into the socket of your door and say the spell seven times. The spell to be spoken is this: 'Arise, daemons of the dark ... for because of her, X daughter of Y, unlawful eggs are being sacrificed; fire, fire, unlawfulness, unlawfulness! Isis raised a loud cry, and the world was thrown into confusion. She tosses and turns on her holy bed, and its bonds and those of the dcemon world are smashed to pieces because of the enmity and impiety of X, daughter of Y. But you, Isis and Osiris and daemons of the chthonic world, ABLAMGOUNOTH O ABRASAX, and daemons who are beneath the earth, arise, you who are from the abyss, and cause her, X

daughter of Y, to love me. A son of B, passionately with desire in her belly, until she comes and sticks her female genitals onto my male genitals. If she wishes to fall asleep, spread knotted leather whips under her and thorns upon her temples, so that she may consent to whorish sex ... you, X, have been bound by the fibres of the sacred palm tree, so that you may love A for ever. May no barking dog release you, no braying ass, no cockerel, no priest who removes magical spells, no clashing cymbals, no scannel flute. (PGM XXXVI 134–60)

The spell evokes a terrifying, apocalyptic world of fire and darkness, of writhing bodies and whipping and frenzied sex to the background sounds of animal cries, plangent flutes and clashing percussion. The woman has perhaps spurned the practitioner: the spell will wreak her destruction as an individual. She is to suffer dreadful physical torment until she submits to intercourse with him, and then she will degrade herself even further by doing sexual acts that only a whore would consent to do. Other spells make the subjection and desocialisation of the victim even more explicit: she is to be so burned up with love that she will leave her family and home and reject the entire human race apart from the enchanter ‘In frenzy may X come quickly to my house, forgetting her children and her life with her parents, and loathing the entire race of men and women except for me, X; and may she embrace me alone, and come with her spirit subdued by the great power of desire’ (PGM IV 2756–60). Generally, the magical spells talk about sex in the now familiar terms of inequity, of dominator and dominated, of penetrator and penetrated.

Magic had a central place in orthodox Egyptian theology; and consequently one could argue that such erotic binding magic, a part of this theology, is yet another institutionalised method of assaulting and subjugating women and regulating their sexuality. The practitioner of the spell quoted above is a man and the victim a woman, and this is usually the situation. The violent imagery of the erotic spells conjures up what John Winkler called in a recent essay ‘the deep tremors of the hatred of women that seem to seethe in the[ir] symbolic actions’¹⁵ and he went on to hypothesise that their subtext might be one ‘of system-wide female victimage and male dominance’.¹⁶ It is certainly true that most of the magical texts make the assumption that the practitioner will be a man and the object a woman, even down to feminine pronouns being used when the name still remains to be inserted in the exemplar; but Winkler may have overstated the case somewhat when he reads them as another instrument of patriarchal control. By its very nature, being the object of another’s desire means being defined passively, and women used exactly the same sort of

spells, couched in the same language of subjection and domination, to make men desire them:

I will bind you, Nilus ... son of Demetria, with great evils. Neither gods nor men will procure a pure release for you! On the contrary you will love me, Capitolina, alone, and that you might forget your parents, children and friends. (PGM XV 1–6)

Furthermore, some spells are specifically stated to be applicable to both sexes:

Love spell of attraction, an excellent divination by fire, than which none is greater. It attracts men to women and women to men and makes virgins rush out of their homes. (PGM XXXVI 69–71)

Women are clearly using magic in the hope of bringing their desires to physical consummation, and the literary topos of the sorceress may suggest that some women were active as practitioners, perhaps for a largely female clientele.¹⁷ The papyri include some spells attributed to female magicians, such as the charm of ‘the Syrian woman of Gadara for any inflammation’ (PGM XX 4–12) and the antiheadache charm of the Thessalian Philinna (PGM XX 13–19). Also, the magical papyri constantly acknowledged the positive reproductive power of women: when the practitioner names the victim of the enchantment, she or he is invariably designated by their matronymic. Of course, there is a practical consideration here. Knowledge of the name of the victim’s parent is vital for the spell to be efficacious, and it is only possible to be absolutely sure about his or her mother, but there is more to the question than this. Rather than asserting ‘the reign of the phallus’, they emphasise the mystic importance of the uterine bond between mother and child. Winkler was misled by thinking of the magical papyri in terms of Greek society and thought rather than Egyptian, and had not fully appreciated the traditional local basis of most of their ritual actions. Admittedly, there is much in the magical texts that is syncretistic, or has come about through interaction with contemporary schools of thought such as Neoplatonism, but the magical texts, whether written in Demotic or Greek, place the reader firmly in an Egyptian world.

Erotic Magical Texts From Græco-Roman Egypt

Some representative examples of the erotic magical spells from Egypt have already been seen. One might suppose from a cursory reading of

them that they are scattered in date and provenance, but in fact a large proportion of the magical texts that have survived probably originated from a common source of the late third or fourth century CE. Between 1828 and his death in 1857, a man known as Jean or Johann d'Anastasi was the Swedish consular representative in Alexandria. He was a colourful character, of Armenian origin, who managed to combine his diplomatic duties with a keen interest in antiquities. At some point during his time in Egypt, Anastasi was able to acquire large collections of papyri, among which were some of the most important and extensive magical texts, including the long Demotic papyrus now in two parts, one in Leiden and the other in London. There is no reliable information about their provenance, though Anastasi claimed to have bought them at Thebes. The majority of Anastasi's *grimoires* in Demotic and Greek probably derived from a single temple archive, purchased in the early nineteenth century and later scattered across Europe through successive auctions of his collection. The publication of a corpus of the magical papyri went through many tribulations, including the deaths of some of the principal editors in the First World War, until the first two volumes were eventually published as *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (conventionally abbreviated as PGM) in 1928 and 1931.¹⁸ These were re-edited, incorporating many corrections, between 1973 and 1974.¹⁹ There is still no text corpus of Demotic magical papyri (hereafter PDM), though excellent translations of them were included in the translated *Papyri Graecae Magicae* edited by H. D. Betz.²⁰

Many of these texts were almost certainly the property of a magical practitioner, perhaps of priestly status, since it is very unlikely that there was an extensive secular ownership of magical books in Egypt.²¹ It is right to think of the magical texts as strategies for self-help to which people have recourse when ordinary channels fail, but they are not home remedies: on the contrary, they are for use by the expert. True, there are some magical papyri from domestic contexts, such as the rubbish heaps of Oxyrhynchus; but the strong theological element found even in these vernacular spells, against scorpion bites and so forth, may imply that they ultimately originated from a priestly source. The catalogues of the sacred holdings of libraries inscribed on temple walls include many texts which seem to be of a magical or astrological nature. At Edfu, for instance, the priests of the temple of Horus had access to the following titles:

The book about the prevention of the things which bring misfortune. The (book about the) principles which regulate the cycle of the stars. The book of the destruction of Seth and protection against the crocodile. All the books about the

capture of predatory beasts, protection against the crocodile
... protection against reptiles.²²

The magical papyri that have survived only represent a random selection of what would have once existed, but they can still give a good idea of the general types of spell that could be used to exercise erotic control. The most usual is the *agogê* (plural *agôgai*), literally 'leading-spell', here usually translated as 'love-spell of attraction', though mutual attraction between equals is not part of the equation. The *agôgai* are empirical texts, pragmatic responses to the problems of unrequited desire and what amounts to an obsession for the victim by the practitioner. Essentially, the agent wishes to transpose his own fixation for his victim into her. Most of the magical texts follow a more or less standard format. They open with an appeal to an appropriate deity, and then have an entreaty cast as an order for the deity to bring about the agent's desire, which is the core of the whole text. In order for the agent's wish to be granted, he is required to speak a mantra accompanied by prescribed ritual actions.

This performative aspect typically takes place at night, sometimes in the open air, sometimes indoors. The practitioner, usually a man, envisages his (female) victim lying asleep in her own home: she is thus vulnerable and potentially available for magical possession. An offering such as 'a white dove's blood and fat, untreated myrrh, parched wormwood' (PGM IV 2891.1–4) is made to the appropriate deity, such as Aphrodite, and to ensure the success of the rite it is crucial to accompany the offering with the correct invocations and magical formulae. Through these, the agent hopes to instill in his victim a feeling of such intense and burning restlessness, such intestinal sexual frenzy, that she will be powerless to resist him. In this way, Hermias son of Hermione sought to enchant a woman called Tigerous:

O Anubis, god on earth and under earth ... assume all your authority and all your power against Tigerous daughter of Sophia. Make her stop being proud, calculating and shameful, and draw her to me, beneath my feet, melting with passionate desire at every house of the day and night, always thinking of me while she is eating, drinking, working, conversing, sleeping, having dreams or nightmares, until she is scourged by you and comes desiring me, overflowing with bounty, with a generous soul and graciously giving me both herself and her possessions and fulfilling what is appropriate for women in regards to men, serving both my desire and her own unhesitatingly and unabashedly, joining thigh to thigh and belly to belly and her genitals to my genitals, most pleasant.

This spell is accompanied by the magical names written out in a configuration reminiscent of the female genitalia. Another *agôgê* (PGM IV 2939–42) vividly evokes the next stage of the successful rite: the hapless enchanted woman leaving her bed like a zombie and stumbling off blindly to the practitioner's house. This is positive ritualisation, the enactment and realisation through the spoken word of the desired state of affairs. Here the planet Venus, the planet of love and sex, is used as a fiery climactic barometer of the woman's proximity to the agent:

If Venus glows red, it is a sign that she has been smitten; if you see it scattering sparks, she has started her journey; if it takes on an elliptical shape like a lamp-flame, she is come!

Sometimes more direct intervention by the supernatural agent against the body rather than the mind of the victim is envisaged. In a third-century spell²³ the dæmon is commanded to bring the object of desire to a bath-house and then turn itself into a bath attendant. As it pours water over the victim, that and the steamy atmosphere of the bath-house will have a sympathetic effect on her and inflame her passions: 'burn, set on fire the soul, the liver, the spirit of burned, inflame, tortured Gorgonia daughter of Nilogenia until she casts herself into the bath-house.' Apart from being an obvious erotic venue, the bath-house is an appropriate place for sex magic because of the vulnerability of the victim: it is there that naked bodies are exposed to the dangerous touch and sight of strangers.

Magic can regulate women's sexual activities in ways other than making them mad with lust for the enchanter. The *katadesmos*, literally 'binding spell', is a well-established magical technique in Egypt, and from there entered the common pool of European magical symbolism. In the erotic magical corpus, the function of *kataesmoi* is usually to inspire a woman with love and then to keep her at the exclusive sexual disposal of one man. In one magical text (PGM IV 296–466), the practitioner is instructed to take wax or clay and mould a figure of a kneeling woman with her arms tied behind her back, the traditional posture of the vanquished Egyptian enemy (Figure 12). The text specifies various magical formulae to be inscribed on different parts of the figure, including the woman's name and her matronymic over the heart. Then take thirteen copper needles and stick one in the brain, while saying,



Figure 12 The god Seth bound and pierced in the posture of a victim, at the temple of Hathorat Dendera. (After Lindsay 1965)

‘Oh X, I am piercing your brain’, and stick two in the ears and two in the eyes and one in the mouth and two in the midriff and one in the hands and two in the genitals and two in the soles of the feet, saying each time, ‘I am piercing such and such a part of the body of her, X, so that she may remember no one but me, Y, alone.’

How this ritual worked in practice is shown by a third-century CE terracotta figure of a woman now in the Louvre (see Plate 16) which was found along with a magical text in a jar at Antinoöpolis, still impaled with thirteen shafts. The accompanying text identifies the victim: her name is Ptolemaïs. To the contemporary viewer it is a disturbing image, sharply recalling the sexual mutilations inflicted on the bodies of unnumerable serial killer victims where the eroticised areas of the body – eyes, breasts, thighs, genitalia – are the foci of attack. In fact, the intention of the man who made the figure of Ptolemaïs might qualitatively have not been so different from that of a psychopath. Both desire to reduce their victims to completely passive beings without autonomy, entirely subject to him, because of unexpressed sexual feelings. In 1662, twelve centuries after the fashioning of the Antinoöpolis figure, the same manipulative concepts behind the use of the mangled image were stated powerfully in the confession of the Scottish witch Isobel Gowdie.²⁴ To kill the sons of a local landowner by witchcraft, Gowdie and her cohorts consecrated to

the Devil a clay

picture of *the Lairdis* sones. It haid all the pairtis and merkis of a child, such as heid, eyes, nose, handis, foot, mowth and little lippes. It wanted no mark of a child; and the handis of it folded down by its sydes. It was like a pow, or a flain gryce. We laid the face of it to the fyre; and a cleir fyre round abowt it till it ves read like a cole.

Gowdie's comparisons for the image she created are arresting, and would have been quite comprehensible to the magical practitioner in third-century Antinoö-polis. The mutilated figure of the bewitched child, she says, is like 'pow, or a flain gryce' – like a lump of dough or a flayed sucking-pig. When applied to a human, they have horrible connotations of malleability, dehumanisation, passivity and imminent consumption.

As well as inspiring sexual desire in an individual, magic can suppress it:

If you want your wife not to be had by another man. Take earth and mix it with ink and myrrh, and shape a crocodile, and put it into a lead coffin and write on it the Great Name and the name of your wife and 'Let not X have sex with any other man except me, Y.' (PGM XIII 322–5)

Something which can only be guessed is the psychological effect of these magical rituals on practitioner and client. It is very difficult to assess the relationship between mystical and mundane, especially in a society where magic was so pervasive. Among the Azande of Sudan, another culture where magic was socially central, Evans-Pritchard observed that their magicians maintained an impassive, businesslike attitude while reciting spells: 'There does not seem to be any constant emotional reaction of magicians during a rite.'²⁵ One might speculate that the same was the case with the Egyptian magicians. The magic ritual assigns a role of calm and magisterial control to the practitioner, in contrast with the violence of the passions that consume the victim and, presumably, the client. The length and complexity of some of the rituals, involving numerous separate operations in different places, would have needed a cool practitioner to complete them in accordance with the proper ritual. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that the spells were not intended to impress and inspire awe in the client. The rituals typically include long metrical litanies interspersed with magical names, complicated techniques and exotic, or at least unfamiliar, ingredients: one spell (PGM IV 2459–63) requires a river crab, the fat of a dappled virgin goat, baboon dung,

ibis eggs, storax, myrrh, galingale, frankincense and onions. Whatever practical effect such spells might have had in bringing the beloved to the lover, they might well have had a beneficial effect on the client by making him or her feel that everything possible had been done to deal with the problem, thereby increasing confidence and morale.

Where the magical texts are most uniquely informative is regarding the nature and quality of the sexual relations that the practitioners hoped to enjoy with the enchanted person. The other kinds of written evidence from Græco-Roman Egypt do not articulate what might be termed a formal discourse of sex, and the magical papyri are exceptional because they provide some explicit information on genital functions, erogenous zones and sexual expectations. The 'drawing spells' aim to turn women into frenzied Bacchantes burning with a sexual abandon so great that the self is utterly negated and they will do things they would never normally do. Just as the magical practitioner places himself and his desire on a pan-cosmic plane, so it is hoped that the macrocosm will turn into the microcosm when desire is consummated. Their whole bodies become 'little fiery universes ... human espresso machines'²⁶ for the passionate enjoyment of sex:

O lord daemon, attract, inflame, destroy, consume her, and cause her to swoon with love as she is being consumed and inflamed! Sting the tortured soul, the heart, of Carosa daughter of Thelo, until she bursts forth from her house and comes to Apalus son of Theonilla, out of passion and love, in this very hour, immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly! As long as the magical rite is efficacious, do not allow Carosa to think of her own husband, child, drink or food, but let her come melting for passion and love and intercourse with Apalus son of Theonilla, at this very hour, immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly! (PGM XIX a 50–4)

These images of sex are obviously a kind of erotic rhetoric, but the fact that they were ever expressed at all is interesting. They use an extensive sexual vocabulary and voice an interest in the pathology of sex. Also, although they presuppose that the enchanted woman has no choice over her own sexual availability, she will actively enjoy sex with the practitioner: she is not expected to lie back and think of Egypt. The sexual act is to be free of such encumbrances as home and family, and it is interesting that these magical papyri are almost the first texts to talk about a woman's enjoyment of sex unconnected with reproductivity. Whether or not her frantic enjoyment is thought of as increasing the man's pleasure is unclear. Some of the Demotic spells and prescriptions from the London-Leiden papyrus seem to be interested in the woman's enjoyment of sex. 'A prescription to cause a

woman to love her husband'; 'to make a woman love copulating with her husband' (PDM XIV 1046 and 1047). These prescriptions recommend phallic ointments followed by penetrative sex which is, of course, a panacea in the ancient world. Other spells underscore the frenzy of sexual abandon by comparing the partners with wild beasts:

My heart yearns, my heart loves with a longing which a she-cat feels for a tomcat, a longing which a she-wolf feels for a wolf, a longing which a bitch feels for a dog ... you should heat [the *materia magica*] with flax stalks; you should recite to it seven times for seven days; you should anoint your phallus with and lie with the woman, and you should anoint the womans heart as well. (PDM XIV 1029–31 and 1042–45)

Sexual intercourse as detailed in the magical papyri starts off, as one might expect, with foreplay of some kind. Beforehand, the man might avail himself of one of a number of remedies to keep his sexual stamina up, such as drinking decoctions of celery and rocquette seeds (PGM CXXVII 11–12) or of pinecones, wine and pepper (PGM VII 184). If he was impotent or otherwise had trouble copulating, he could smear gum mixed with wine and honey over his face (PGM VII 179–80). Premature ejaculation during foreplay could be avoided by applying the juice of a certain kind of carrot to the penis (PGM CXXVII 5–7). Foreplay was also a good opportunity to mutter a quick onomatopoeic charm to ensure that the act would be pleasurable: 'For the purpose of love, say while kissing passionately "ANOK THAZI N EPIBATHA CHEOUCH CHA ANOK ANOK CHARIE MOUTH LAILAM"' (PGM VII 405–6). Once the couple was safely in bed together, they could make love in various ways. Though this may be no more than a standard trope, the magical papyri seem to be referring to vaginal intercourse most often, with 'head to head and lip to lip and belly to belly and thigh pressed to thigh and genitals to genitals' (PGM IV 404). It is unclear, however, which partner is visualised as being on top. Magical figures found in association with love spells are usually photographed in such a way as to show the man on top (Plate 17), but this may be nothing more than an expression of the norms of the photographer! These little models are often quite carefully finished off, without an obvious underside, and male and female is distinguished by a different coloured wax or clay, so maybe they are deliberately designed to leave the relative position of the partners ambiguous. Other magical texts attest varied ways of coupling: the woman could be entered rectally, or she might fellate the man, or she might be called upon to do everything the enchanter could envisage:

I bind you, Theodotis daughter of Eos, to the tail of the snake

and the mouth of the crocodile and the horns of the ram and the venom of the asp and the whiskers of the cat and the penis of the god, so that you can never have intercourse ever with another man, and not be taken from the rear or in front or in the mouth, and not do anything for pleasure with any man other than me alone. Ammonion son of Hermitaris. Fulfil the contract of this binding spell – the very one Isis herself used – so that Theodotis daughter of Eos may no longer have any experience of a man other than me, Ammonion, she being enslaved and maddened, and flying through the air in search of me, Ammonion son of Hermitaris, to bring thigh to thigh and genital to genital for intercourse always, for the entire length of her life.²⁷

Some binding spells run through a variety of sexual possibilities that the victim will not experience until she goes to the enchanter: ‘let her be filled with desire for me, X son of Y. Let her not be had in a promiscuous way, let her not be taken anally, nor let her do anything with another man for pleasure, just with me alone, namely X’ (PGM IV 351–5). No other sexual variations are mentioned, and one may only speculate as to whether the violent binding and scourging imagery used in the rituals was ever acted out in real life. As for the duration of the wished-for passion, some of the spells want it to last for ever, while others only want a limited involvement: ‘Make Nice daughter of Apollonous fall in love with Pantous son of Tmesios for five months.’²⁸ One wonders why this exact amount of time was specified: was Pantous only going to be in the area where Nice lived for this period? Or did Nicê have an absent husband whose return was anticipated after that time? If recreational sex was on the agenda, it is no coincidence that recipes for contraceptives are closely associated with erotic magical spells.

Heterosexual sex was not the only item on the magical menu. The spells of homosexual attraction are formulated using exactly the same terminology as heterosexual examples, with the now familiar elements of compulsion and domination. Among the Greek papyri, there are two examples each of spells where men are trying to enchant other men and women other women, and there also seems to be an adaptable dual-purpose spell (PGM XII 365–75) for causing separation. In the latter spell the pronouns which indicate both practitioner and victims are in the masculine, showing that it was intended to come between two men, but there is a variant in the invocation which can be brought into play if a husband and wife are to be separated: ‘ “Give to him, X the son of Y, strife and war, and to him, A the son of B, odiousness and emnity, just as Typhon and Osiris

had” (but if it be a husband and wife, say “just as Typhon and Isis had”).’ As for the spells of attraction, the homosexual examples are less explicit about sexual matters than the *katadesmoi* and *agôgai* between men and women, even though they are in more or less the same format and use much of the same imagery. Perhaps the practitioner omitted as inappropriate the details of intercourse, which the model spell would probably have presumed to be between a man and a woman. The papyrus (PGM XXXIIa 1–25) with the following example was excavated in 1888 at the cemetery of Hawara, still rolled up and with a crude clay figure of the beloved bound to it:

As Typhon is the adversary of Helios, so inflame the heart and soul of the man Ammonius son of Helen, born from her own womb ... burn the soul and heart of that man Ammonius son of Helen with love of this Serapiacus son of Threpte, now, now, quickly, quickly!

A variant of the same spell follows immediately after:

In this same hour and on this same day, from this moment on, meld together the souls of both men and cause that Ammonius son of Helen to love this Serapiacus son of Threpte through every hour, every day and every night.’

One of the Lesbian spells (PGM XXXII 1–19), also from Hawara, is equally non-committal about sex. It repeats slight variants on the same formula three times:

I adjure you, Euangelus, by Anubis and Hermes and all the rest of the powers down below: attract and bind Sarapias daughter of Helen, to this woman here, Heraïs daughter of Thermoutharin, now, now, quickly, quickly!²⁹

Sex was even conceivable with non-human partners. In a world where supernatural beings have such an intimate association with humans, it is unsurprising that they can be potential lovers too; and traditional Egyptian beliefs about the erotic power of the dead may have underscored this. People dreamed up alluring phantoms, had sex with them, and even fell in love with them. The story of Setne’s destructive dream involvement with the succubus/prostitute Tabubu has already been translated in [Chapter 5](#), and the idea of making love with a good-looking apparition had great longevity. Its last gasp comes in all the Egyptomaniac films and novels where sexy mummies (usually female) are magically revived to seduce the archaeologist (usually male). The erotic power of the phantasm is illustrated by a

second-century CE text (PGM XXXIV), once thought to be a magical incantation but now regarded as a fragment of a lost romance. Incidentally, it also gives an insight into the mechanics of consulting a magical practitioner. Only 24 lines of the text survive, but the context seems fairly clear. A magical practitioner is addressing a parent who, in the missing preceding section, seems to have requested a love charm to stop his or her daughter falling in love with a handsome man who is continually appearing to her in a dream. The practitioner replies:

‘[should I command] the sun will stop in its course; and should I order the moon, it will descend from the skies for me; and should I wish to hold back the day, the night will stay behind for me; but should I, on the other hand, ask for day, the light will not depart; and should I wish to sail the sea, I would have no need of a boat; and should I wish to be transported through the air, I will be lifted up. It is only a love philtre that I cannot find, neither one that can cause, nor one that can stop love. For the earth, in fear of the god of love, does not produce such a thing. But if anyone has such a drug to offer, I beg and beseech them: Give it! I’m ready to drink it, I’m ready to rub it on to myself.’³⁰

‘You say that your daughter keeps seeing a handsome phantasm in a dream, and that seems surprising to you? Let me tell you how many other people have fallen in love with surprising bodies in their dreams ...’

The text unfortunately breaks off at the point where the narrator seems ready to begin a discussion of the psychopathology of sexual infatuation with unsuitable love-objects, such as Phaedra and the bull and Pygmalion and the statue. The whole story seems to mirror an anecdote in Plutarch that women can have sex with male spirits and gods, but not vice versa:

That an immortal god should take sexual pleasure in a physical body is surely hard to credit. Yet the Egyptians make a distinction here that is reckoned plausible: while a woman can be approached by a divine spirit and impregnated, there is no such thing as sexual intercourse between a man and a divinity.³¹

The theme continued as a topos of indigenous Egyptian fiction. Plutarch should have told the celibate Christian anchorites in the desert, who frequently tussled with demons in the form of attractive women, that they were incorporeal; and in a tenth century CE Coptic

story, the daughter of a king is violated by a demon in her dreams and dies 'in the manner of whore, having lost that first virginity, the thing which is reckoned to be more valuable than anything.'³²

Medicine and Magic

It is equally untrue to perceive a sharp bifurcation between magic and medicine as it is to perceive one between magic and religion. Included in the corpus of magical texts are a number of quasi-medical prescriptions for aphrodisiacs and contraceptives, whose pharmacopoeia seems to include strong elements of sympathetic magic and shows parallels with earlier Egyptian texts. Homeopathic affinity of disease and remedy, whether visual or verbal, was an important concept behind Egyptian medico-magical treatments. For instance, the Kahun papyrus of the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 2500 BCE) includes a gynaecological remedy for a woman suffering from a pain in the uterus associated with a smelly discharge. The physician was to cure the woman by fumigating her with something that smelled like the discharge: in this case, roast meat. Similarly, case 815 of the medical Papyrus Ebers (Eighteenth Dynasty, c. 1400 BCE) suggests the use of an unknown mineral called *qsnty* for a woman with internal pains. This substance is included for sympathetic punning reasons, because the Egyptian for 'troublesome pain' is *mrt qsnt*.

To return to the later evidence, a *katadesmos* (PGM XXXVI 283–94) entitled 'genital key spell' designed to keep a woman exclusively for one man utilises a crow's egg and the gall of an eel. There was probably a sympathetic association between eel/penis and egg/womb. The resulting concoction was to be smeared on the man's genitals. The Demotic spells of the London-Leiden papyrus give recipes for ointments for erotic purposes made from fish, which are to be rubbed onto the penis or the face before intercourse. Fish are common symbols of eroticism, fecundity and rebirth in Egyptian iconography, partly because they were supposed to have swallowed Osiris' penis when his body was dismembered and thrown into the Nile, and partly because of the appearance and breeding habits of such fish as the *Tilapia nilotica*, a common ingredient of magical spells. Certain species of this genus of fish store their eggs in the mouth until they are hatched: they are then discharged, in an obvious parallel to human ejaculation. This autogenesis was conflated with the creation myth of Re-Atum, who created the universe by masturbation, and the association was made even more potent because the breeding season of the *Tilapia nilotica* coincides with the Nile flood. The vocabulary and ingredients of these later texts also show a continuity with Egyptian aphrodisiac lore. A very fragmentary work on aphrodisiacs

dating to the Nineteenth Dynasty (c. 1100 BCE), preserved on a papyrus from the Chester Beatty collection now in the British Museum, includes prescriptions to increase sexual potency and also to deal with impotence.

The contraceptives that occur in the magical papyri would probably not have been very effective. 'A contraceptive: pick up a bean that has a worm in it, and wear it as an amulet' (PGM LXIII 24–5). Honey is a frequent ingredient in the Demotic texts,³³ often used to soak a cloth pessary which is then inserted into the vagina: the viscosity of the honey might have had some occludant effect, as well as being a mild spermicide. This method has had an extraordinary longevity, and is supposed to have been employed as late as the 1970s by the legendary actress (and sexual athlete) Mae West. Among the ingredients of the following contraceptive spell (PGM XXXVI 320–32) are bitter vetches, a plant thought to have general constraining properties in antiquity,³⁴ and a frog, which is associated with the womb, sex and fertility via the Egyptian frog-goddess Heket:

A contraceptive, the best one in the world: take some bitter vetches, one for each year you wish to remain infertile, and rub them in the menstrual flow when the woman is menstruating. Let her steep her own genitals in them. And take a frog and throw the vetches into its mouth that it may swallow them down, let the frog loose and let it go back to where you took it from. Take the seed of henbane, wet it in mare's milk, take the nasal mucus of a cow with grains of barley, and put these into a piece of fawnskin and on the outside bind it up with mulehide skin and attach it as an amulet during the waning of the moon.

Amulets

The magical papyri articulate how acutely people were aware that the towns and cities of Græco-Roman Egypt were fraught with supernatural threats. Expressions of vulnerability to forces beyond human control regularly come up in letters: a standard farewell in letters is the wish 'may the evil eye not touch you!' In this dangerous world of hidden and inimical powers, wearing some kind of magical protection was an important means of self-preservation. Appropriate amulets were available for every predicament, especially for inherently dangerous times of life such as pregnancy and childbirth. (Gynaecological amulets to prevent the womb wandering and promote general female good health are illustrated in [Figure 2](#).) As well as apotropaic amulets which are essentially for passive protection, one

could also get amulets to bring about a specific situation, and often that situation was sexual. There are several actual examples of such amulets from Egypt.³⁵In a private collection, there is a small black gem stone which was probably set to be worn as a ring or pendant.³⁶It is engraved with a figure of a winged Eros about to shoot a love-dart from his bow, and encircled by a cluster of magical letters. On the reverse, running around the edge of the stone, the same gem-cutter inscribed a simple *agôgê*: 'Deliver to me, the wearer, the *psychê* of Secundilla.' In a magical context, *psychê* is replete with meanings, but essentially the wearer wanted Secundilla to give herself to him utterly, in the same way as in the spells on papyrus.

Egyptian amulets often work on specific associations of the material they are made from, the image they are inscribed with, and the method of wearing. To illustrate this, I should like to return to the medico-magical treatise known as the *Cyranides*.³⁷the entire first book of this strange work is about how the principles of homophony, or similar sounds, can be harnessed magically: a similar-sounding name can procure a similar-sounding magical function. Earlier I quoted a passage where an amulet of *kinaidion-stone*, or obsidian, could change a man's sexual status to that of *kinaidos*, as long as it was worn with the correct ritual appurtenances, in this case parts of the *kinadios-fish* and the *kinaidios-bird*. Bird, fish, stone and plant symbolise the four elements, from which both man and the cosmos are composed. The same chapter of the *Cyranides* describes how another kind of amulet can be magically powerful if worn with the right eye of the *kinaidios-bird* (the wryneck, a very common ingredient in Greek sex magic):

If somebody wears the right eye of the *kinaidios-bird* under an unblemished lapis lazuli, on which Aphrodite is engraved, the wearer will appear charming, he will be famous amongst people and will win every legal case. The left eye has the same effect if worn by women.

An amulet sacred to Aphrodite, then, will make one sexually attractive and persuasive. Charm and the ability to persuade are interdependent. Other amulets can help a waning sexual performance:

On a lapis lazuli, an ostrich is engraved holding a *Tilapia nilotica* fish³⁸in its bill. Place under the stone a grain (*kokkos*) of the orchid (*satyrios*) and a small piece of the gizzard of the ostrich. Mount the amulet and wear it for a good digestion. It also brings about an erection and desire for sexual activity. It is especially efficacious in bringing about an erection to those who are already old but want to have sex a lot. It also makes the wearer charming.

The magical ingredients used in this spell illustrate the complex layers of associations of sound and image which harness the innate erotic powers of the ingredients. As mentioned earlier, the *Tilapia nilotica* fish is a phallic symbol, and the *Cyranides* goes on to advise that the fat of this fish smoothed with honey over the genital areas brings about the greatest sexual pleasure. Similarly the plant *satyrion*, named after the hypersexual satyrs, has obvious phallic connotations, which are doubled because *satyrion* is a kind of orchid, a plant thought to resemble the testicles. Finally, the word for the ‘grain’ of the *satyrion* conceals yet another pun: *kokkos* is a slang word for testicles.

Like the magical papyri, the instructions in the *Cyranides* allow for the polymorphous perversity of human sexual expression. The subject of the second chapter of the *Cyranides* is *materia magica* beginning with the letter b in Greek: the stone is the beryl, the plant a kind of juniper, the fish a crab and the bird a crow. The rich set of encoded associations is here too: the crow was a symbol of matrimonial love, and the crab is the sign of the zodiac. One is instructed to

take a beryl and engrave on it a crow, with a crab at its feet; enclose a little juniper, a small piece of the bird’s heart, and the *aphrodite* of the crab: wear it as you like ... it will make the wearer charming and successful in all things; moreover it brings about in good measure the most favourable relationships for married people, and the most harmonious ones of effeminates (*androgynoi*).

So the dozens of intaglios, engraved with innocuous-looking designs and filling dusty museum cabinets, take on a very different meaning when one considers the powers they were believed to have and the strange organic detritus that once accompanied them: bits of plant root, fish-bones, the wing-tips or eyes of dead birds. However, once again it is important to think of these objects being used by living people, and to imagine how individuals might have felt when they drew the gem onto the finger or hung it around the neck. Under the gems influence one became more charming, confident and persuasive, more able to win friends and influence people: and it is hard to believe that the wearers did not face the dangerous street with an enhanced feeling of radiance and well-being.

Astrology

Magical spells, recipes and amulets were not the only supernatural ways of controlling or getting more information about one’s sex life in Græco-Roman Egypt. Part of Egypt’s ‘curriculum of occult sciences’

was a deep interest in the practical application of astrology, and as one can see today by looking at the 'stars' in any tabloid newspaper, sexual matters were a subject of absorbing interest. Egypt had had a long tradition of astrological observation, often for calendrical purposes. Priests had worked out how to predict the progress of the inundation by observing the heliacal rising of Sothis, the Dog Star, in mid-July, and such astronomical knowledge could also be used to govern sexual activity. Calendars of lucky and unlucky days tabulated when, where and with whom it was propitious to have intercourse. These strictures often had mythological bases and are tied in with atmospheric conditions, the macrocosm again reflecting the microcosm. P. Sallier IV, a papyrus of Ramessid date (c. 100 BCE) now in the British Museum, gives instructions about the various categories of people with whom it would be unwise to make love on unlucky days, and the consequences if one did. On Tybi 17 'the earth was in darkness on this day. He who has intercourse with a woman on this day falls ill, disease will consume him.' Two days later 'violent winds and storms burst in the sky on this day. Disease consumes the man who has intercourse with a woman.' On 12 Pharmouthi, 'do not look at a ploughman anywhere on this day, and do not have intercourse with anyone who is related to one.' That these old ideas still had a validity in Græco-Roman Egypt is demonstrated by the inscriptions in the temple of Edfu, which list unpropitious days in the various nomes and stipulate who should abstain from sex with whom during them.³⁹

Mme Sosostriis, T. S. Eliot's famous clairvoyante, took the name of a Middle Kingdom pharaoh to associate herself with the Egyptian mystico-astrological tradition, and in the same way Egyptians were thought to be the astrologers of antiquity *par excellence*.⁴⁰ However, astrology as it was practised in Græco-Roman Egypt owed a considerable debt to Mesopotamia, and to the Chaldaeans in particular. The astrological theories formulated by them seem to have been transmitted to Egypt in the early Hellenistic period and were then formulated and systematised there, receiving a substantial injection of Egyptian lore in the process. One major Egyptian astrological treatise, probably composed at Alexandria in the second century BCE and now known only from fragments, was that attributed to the 'pharaoh Nechepso' and the 'priest Petosiris'. Their status and names, like Mme Sosostriis, serve to place their work in an unambiguously Egyptian milieu, and the compilers claim to have received their wisdom directly from the god Hermes/Thoth, but in fact much Babylonian influence is evident in it. In antiquity, their compendium had a wide circulation, and the passage from Juvenal quoted earlier gives an impression of how people may have used it practically in their lives. Most of this popular Hellenistic astrology is

now lost, or survives only in fragments or much later epitomes, but one can get a good idea of the kinds of questions such astrology addressed. There was *genika*, or universal astrology; *klêroi* or lots, like the oracles of Astrampsychus; *apotelesmata*, or predictive astrology; *melothesia*, which dealt with the correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm, and so on. In the second century CE, Ptolemy of Alexandria was the author of several important astronomical and astrological works, including the *Tetrabiblus*, which takes a broad view of the science. Not only does Ptolemy attempt to demonstrate to critics and sceptics the reality of the ‘cosmic sympathy’ principle, but he also deals with philosophical questions that obtrude onto astrology, such as fate and free will. He had a very high reputation up to the Renaissance and beyond, via translations of the *Tetrabiblus*, first printed as early as 1484, and of another of his astronomical works, the *Almagest*. Another Egyptian astrologer was Hephaestion of Thebes, who compiled a treatise on horoscopes in the early fifth century CE. Humbler Egyptian astrologers whose names are not known still saw themselves as part of this glorious tradition. A practitioner compiling a highly detailed horoscope (P. Lond. I 130) in 81 CE prefaced it with an acknowledgement of his own debt to the past, thus associating himself with the great astrologers of old:

The Egyptians of the past, who had carefully studied the heavenly bodies and had learned the motions of the seven gods, compiled and arranged everything in perpetual tables and generously bequeathed their knowledge of these things to us.

The basic principle underlying astrology is that there is an affinity between stars and humans, the so-called ‘cosmic sympathy’ principle. In ancient thought, humans and planets have in common the four elemental qualities of heat, cold, dryness and moisture, and since planets such as the sun and moon can have observable effects upon the earth, it follows that other planets can affect humans, whose qualities they share. ‘On this basis people predict everything that will happen in the universe concerning every single person, especially regarding his destiny and personality,’ observed the neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, originally from Lycopolis in Middle Egypt (*Enneads* III 1.5). Ancient astrological works from Egypt and elsewhere concern themselves with two main areas, the ‘judicial’ and the ‘horoscopic’. The judicial sought to predict national events, such as the height of the inundation, from meteorological portents. ‘The occurrence of a partial eclipse betokens as follows,’ wrote Nechepso. ‘In Aries it means the greatest ills for Egypt, death to the rulers, intrigues, destruction ... in Taurus it means abundance of grain in

Egypt and restlessness of the masses if the eclipse occurs between the fourth and ninth hours of the day.’ Fragments of vernacular judicial texts are known from the papyri.⁴¹ Horoscopic astrology related to the character and fortune of an individual, and placed a similar stress on the position of the planets within the zodiac, especially at the time of birth. A fictitious account of the birth of Alexander the Great has the fugitive pharaoh Nectanebo, now working as an astrologer in Macedonia, attending the accouchement of Alexander’s mother Olympias. He makes the queen delay the birth of the child until the most astrologically propitious moment, the ascent of Jupiter. If the child were born with Cancer and Saturn in the ascendant, he would be a eunuch, or an effeminate hedonist if born under Venus.⁴² This is literary artifice, but reflects the credence placed on astrology, and some of the extant personal horoscopes on papyrus seem to have been cast shortly after the births of their subjects. The horoscope of Philoë (P. Oslo I 6) relates the position of the heavenly bodies at her birth on 11 March 150 CE: the sun in Pisces, Jupiter and Mercury in Aries, Saturn in Cancer, Mars in Leo, and Venus and the moon in Aquarius. Whole families might go for a consultation. A mid-third-century CE horoscope from Oxyrhynchus (P. Oxy. XLVI 3298) lists the planetary positions at the births of Apolinarius, born on 18 May 219, his son Severus, born on 5 October 242, two younger sons whose names are lost and a fifth, unrelated individual. This text seems to be the rough jottings of an astrologer who also dabbled in magic, because the start of a magical dream-request formula is preserved after the last horoscope.

So astrological consultation and practice was certainly a widespread popular science in Graeco-Roman Egypt, at least among those who could afford it. The standard work⁴³ which inventories the different types of non-documentary papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt includes 68 examples of astrological writings by otherwise anonymous authors, outnumbering the known fragments of major literary figures such as Aeschylus, and this list does not include the numerous personal horoscopes. These texts originated at sites all over Egypt, from the provincial cities like Oxyrhynchus and Antinoöpolis to the agricultural communities of the Fayyum. Many of these unknown astrological writings come into the category of *apotelesmata*, manuals which give the effects of various astral configurations on humans. To judge from these, sexual matters must have been a regular preoccupation of the astrologers’ clients, though the astrological manuals do not give the same immediate and intimate information about the sexual lives of individuals as the magical papyri. The *apotelesmata* would have been used by the practitioner in conjunction with planetary tables and the client’s horoscope to arrive at a prediction, which would presumably

have been given orally. The astrologers present a wide range of sexual activities, which surprised and shocked their first editors:

Our authors almost seem to have taken a kind of sadistic delight in detailing the extent of the turpitudes and sexual perversions for which they held the poetic evening stars responsible. They enumerate all the aberrations of a morbid eroticism with the calm shamelessness of the pedant: rapes, unnatural couplings, whipping, sodomy.⁴⁴

How far this *psychopathica sexualis* would have obtruded upon the life of the regular astrologer's client is impossible to guess, but it is interesting that the astrologer had the opportunity to draw upon this extensive sexual repertory. In the vernacular *apotelesmata* on papyrus, the principal sexual *Leitmotifs* are homosexuality, adultery and other marital problems. A damaged *apotelesmaton* (P. Tebt. II 276) of the second or third century CE from Tebtynis in the Fayyum suggests that 'Venus in conjunction with Mars brings about fornication and adultery; if, moreover, Mercury is in conjunction with them, they produce scandalous lusts.' P. Lond. I 98, an exceptionally detailed horoscope of a man compiled in 95 CE, says that 'Saturn is in trine to Venus and portends that he will be indifferent to women,' and the damaged next line seems to predict that the subject will be prosecuted for homosexuality.⁴⁵ Occasionally the astrological writings give a glimpse into sexual postures. In a rather obscure passage of a text (P. Mich. III 149) which discusses the effect of planets on different parts of the human body, the writer says that Jupiter governs the thighs, and consequently leads homosexual men towards this part of the body, adducing Ganymede as an example from myth. This may refer to intercrural intercourse, a favoured sexual position in man-boy relationships if Greek vase paintings are to be believed.

Astrological beliefs about the effect of the stars on sex contained a strong element of fatalism. What the planets ordained could not be changed. 'If your stars go against you, even the fantastic size of your prick will still get you nowhere,' laments Juvenal's unsuccessful male prostitute (Satire IX 32). This fatalism finds its expression in the manual of Ptolemy who seems to have been interested in helping his clients accept the fate that the stars foretold as well as interpreting them. In Ptolemy and his followers, the principal planets which affect the sexual functions of humans are Jupiter, Venus and Mars. Saturn, generally considered an unfavourable planet, usually exerts a bad influence. Unfavourable configurations of Venus and Saturn, Ptolemy says, will produce utterly transgressive individuals whose sexual behaviour will violate all the taboos, indulging in incest, bestiality and passive homosexuality. Ptolemy is not judging or categorising these

people according to their sexual conduct, however. Unrestrained sexual behaviour is just one component of an all-round bad character produced by unfavourable planetary influences, which will make people born under such configurations

loose, lascivious, doers of base acts, indiscriminating and unclean in sexual relations; impure, deceivers of women and particularly their own kin; unsound, censorious, depraved, philistines, nit-pickers, foul-mouthed, drunken, servile, adulterators; lawless in sexual relations both active and passive, natural and unnatural; willing to seek sexual relations with those barred by age, status or law, or with animals; impious, contemptuous of the gods, deriding mysteries and sacred rites, entirely faithless, slanderous, poisoners, rogues who will stop at nothing. (*Tetrabiblus* III 13)

Ptolemy, however, is also at pains to stress that as far as sexual activities go humans are, at least in part, products of the society they live in. The effects of the stars cannot be all-embracing. The astrologer must always take into account the mores of different societies, lest he assign 'a consanguineous marriage to one who is Italian by race, instead of to the Egyptian as ought to be the case' (*Tetrabiblus* IV 10).

According to Egyptian views, human beings and the universe are composed of the same basic elements, and consequently it is not surprising to find the universe of the astrologers visualised in terms of the human body and affecting the physical bodies of humans. A second-century CE astronomical treatise now in Michigan (P. Mich. III 149), perhaps from the Fayyum, discusses these ideas in considerable detail. Each of the nine heavenly bodies rules a specific part of the human body. Jupiter governs the breast as far as the stomach and liver, and Mars the genitals and loins. The fact that Jupiter, king of the gods, is tutelary genius of the liver reflects the enormous importance of the organ in contemporary thinking:

the faculty of command is assigned to this part of the body, for just as the leader has foreknowledge on behalf of a state, so does the liver for the body ... appetites for food and sexual intercourse also come from the liver, because from its entrance a broad vessel reaches down to the seminal regions and thence a part of the food consumed is made into blood and distributed to the veins, and part is divided off and becomes semen. For this reason the testicles hang on both sides.

Just as they take control over various bodily zones and the sexual actions associated with them, the planets also hold sway over the

different periods of a human life, the seven ages of man. In Ptolemy's universe, the first four years of life are governed by the moon, because the moon is the heavenly body nearest to the earth, and is in a constant state of change like the body of the growing child. Mercury rules the next ten years of childhood, though according to the Michigan astrological papyrus the puberty of boys is under the charge of Mars as god of manhood and martiality. Venus is the planet of youth between 15 and 23, and thus presides over the erotic flowering of the individual in whom she eventually inspires

a stirring of the generative organs and an impulse towards coming together for love. At this time in particular a sort of frenzy is engendered in human souls, along with a lack of sexual self-control, the desire for any sexual encounter that happens to present itself, burning passion, deceitfulness and the blindness of the person who is head-over-heels in love. (*Tetrabiblus* IV 10).

Ptolemy might have been describing any of the lovers lurking behind the magical papyri, who sought out a magical practitioner to help with their love problems, and unwittingly preserved them for readers they could never have imagined.

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- 1 Ammianus Marcellinus XXII 16.20.
 - 2 E.g. Tacitus, *Histories* I 11; Juvenal XV 1–10; Lucian, *Council of the Gods* 10–11.
 - 3 This translation follows the improved text of Rea (1977) 151–2.
 - 4 Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* VI 41.
 - 5 Luck (1992) 26.
 - 6 See Ritner (1993) 179.
 - 7 The ordeal for catching a thief in Boccaccio, *Decameron*, day 8, story 6 uses the same test as PGM IV 172 ff. I owe this reference to Alan Griffiths.
 - 8 Browne (1974) 3. The papyri of Astrampsychus are P. Oxy. XII 1477 and P. Oxy. XXXVIII 2832–3.
 - 9 Budge (1901) xiii–xiv.
 - 10 Frazer (1910) 220 ff.
 - 11 Malinowski (1948) 69–93, especially 85–7.
 - 12 Frankfort (1948) 54.
 - 13 Evans-Pritchard (1937) 65: on these points generally, see *ibid.*, 63–117.
 - 14 See Baines in Shafer (1991) 165–8. Ritner (1993) 12–13 successfully disposes of the ‘social deviance’ theory of Egyptian magic.
 - 15 Winkler (1990) 73.
 - 16 Winkler (1990) 95.
 - 17 E.g. Theocritus, *Idyll* II, Sel. Pap. II 73.
 - 18 Preisendanz (1928–31).
 - 19 Henrichs (1973–4). For the translations in this book, this has been the text used.
 - 20 The Demotic spells were translated by J. H. Johnson and R. K. Ritner in Betz (1986) 169–72, 195–251 and 286–90. For the translations in this book the text of Griffith and Thompson (1904) has been used.

- 21 Ritner (1993) 205–6.
- 22 Following the text of Brugsch (1871), excerpted. The extent to which these lists can really be trusted as reliable is questionable: see Tait (1993) 307.
- 23 Discussed and translated fully in [Chapter 5](#).
- 24 Published in full in Pitcairn (1848) 603–16: this excerpt from 605.
- 25 Evans-Pritchard (1937) 458.
- 26 Brown (1988) 17.
- 27 Text from Daniel and Maltomini (1991) no. 38.
- 28 Text from Daniel and Maltomini (1991) no. 37.
- 29 A more detailed Lesbian spell is quoted in [Chapter 5](#) above.
- 30 PGM XXXIV, following the improved text of Dodds in White (1951).
- 31 Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*: *Numa* IV.4.
- 32 Crum (1905) 382–3.
- 33 See e.g. PDM XIV 970–84.
- 34 E.g. Pliny, *Natural History* XXVII 57; Dioscorides IV 131. See also PGM VII 976.
- 35 See Bonner (1950) 115–21. I have not addressed the question of funerary amulets here, for which see Andrews (1990) 171–99.
- 36 Described and discussed in Bonner (1950) 118–19.
- 37 Translated fully in [Chapter 6](#). On amulets in the *Cyranides*, see Waegeman (1987).
- 38 Reading *saperdês* for the fish name in preference to the *salpe* of Kaimakis (1976).
- 39 See Chassinat (1897) 330.
- 40 For this, see Barton (1994) 19–30: she suggests that the Egyptian contribution to astrology was more limited than the ancients imagined.
- 41 E.g. PSI VI 727.
- 42 Pseudo-Callisthenes I 12.
- 43 Pack (1965) 109–12.
- 44 Cumont (1937) 183 (my translation).
- 45 This is discussed by Barton (1994) 132.

The Culture of Sex

This discussion of the erotic elements in the material culture of Græco-Roman Egypt has been left till last because, in a sense, it is the most problematic series of data in this book. Firstly, there is a very basic problem of finding evidence. Prudery or scholarly prejudice has traditionally banished items thought to have an explicitly sexual content to the recesses of museum reserve collections. I have a vivid recollection of myself as a graduate student opening a cupboard innocently labelled 'Memphis' in the Petrie Museum, University College London, and being confronted with a veritable forest of phallic figurines and other erotic terracottas. Almost all of them were uncatalogued and unpublished, and therefore unknowable.¹ Out of a different kind of academic prejudice, papyri and ostraca with erotic drawings have been ignored by scholars who are more interested in the administration of the pig tax. Therefore the body of information is comparatively sparse and perhaps even more random than the documentary papyri, which have not been subject to the same censorship. Consequently, much work remains to be done.

Secondly, there are manifold problems of interpreting the evidence there is. Erotic and pornographic words and images are certainly important to any discussion of sexuality in a society. They illustrate, to an extent, the physical foci of fantasy and desire, and broader areas of the relationships between men, women and sexual expression. For instance, if one could demonstrate that the ancient and modern worlds consumed the explicitly erotic in the same way, that would challenge assumptions about the social construction of sexuality. But before this, there is a more fundamental difficulty of defining what was 'erotic' or 'pornographic' in the ancient world. Most writers have focussed on questions of content and intent to define pornography: that it is something which depicts sexual (not necessarily genital) acts with an intention to arouse the viewer. According to this argument, 'erotica' inhabits an unhappy limbo between 'art' and 'porn' as a sort of diluted pornography. More radical critics would argue that all representation is inherently pornographic, because it is primarily concerned with power relationships. Based on the idea of a powerful viewed and a powerless viewed, pornography perpetuates the subject/object

dichotomy. This definition considerably extends the boundaries of pornography to include cultural products that objectify, and therefore Greek tragedies or Roman gladiatorial mosaics could be said to come within its purview.²

Like sexuality, pornography is something for which the Greeks did not really have a word. As a concept and a category, it developed in the nineteenth century, in conjunction with middle-class concerns about morality and corruption. The very word may have been revived, from a single occurrence in Greek, to describe the erotic objects from Pompeii.³ Ultimately, it seems to me that ‘erotica’ and ‘pornography’ are not particularly useful terms to use when considering the ancient world. They are too mutable in meaning, too politically charged and too culturally specific. They are based on the idea that their viewers are from a world where widespread literacy is the norm. Interpretative skills must have been far more complex in the ancient world of restricted literacy. However, it is necessary to find an intellectual sieve to separate which images from Egypt go into this chapter, and which are excluded. To do this, I would prefer to shift the main focus of the argument away from both the putative viewers of the erotic image and the effect the image may be supposed to have on them. Intent is too problematic to reconstruct, and is heavily dependent on the equally evanescent context. The same image may convey a very different charge according to environment: a picture of a woman with her legs open from a mens magazine means, and is intended to mean, something different from one in an obstetrician’s handbook. Since the intent and context of Egyptian images cannot be recovered with much certainty, I shall restrict myself to considering sexual content. Therefore I am concentrating here on images and objects where the focus, explicitly or by suggestion, is on physical love and the various ways in which it can be accomplished: erotics in the proper etymological sense of the word as being ‘the things concerned with Eros’.

The Power of Images

There was a definite awareness of the erotic potential of the visual in Græco-Roman Egypt. This is true for the classical world in general, but may have taken on an added dynamism in Egypt where there was such a well-established tradition of images being imbued with both creative and destructive power. Art could replicate the self, and destruction of the image could destroy the self. Such feelings may well have been in the mind of the Egyptian who scored out the face of Geta, the emperor Caracalla’s disgraced and murdered brother, on the famous official portrait of the imperial family, now in Berlin. By the

same reasoning, the iconography of mummy portraits constructed an image of the subject at his or her sexual peak, which would ensure their rebirth in the most perfect form.⁴ And non-funerary portraits packed a powerful erotic punch as well. This epigram from the Palatine Anthology⁵ is an address by a man to an encaustic panel painting of a young boy, perhaps a portrait not unlike Plate 8:

Oh lucky the man who drew you, and the wax
Which looks like yours can stop dead in its tracks!
Oh, if I came from maggot or wormish spawn,
I'd gobble the wood on which your picture's drawn!

The effect of the beautiful image on the male viewer is to metamorphose him into a phallic worm who will devour the boy. The act of portrayal has made the boy into a passive object of consumption.

Currently, knowledge of paintings from social and domestic contexts in Egypt is not extensive. The geography of the land dictates that human habitation continues in the same areas, so that houses from only a few town sites are preserved. Mural paintings, decorative schemes and other kinds of wall decoration mostly have to be inferred from the references in papyri rather than actual remains.⁶ However, it is probable that there were domestic mural paintings of erotic scenes, at least for wealthy urbanites.⁷ Clement of Alexandria has almost as much to say about the culture of sex as he does about homosexuals and prostitutes. With all the zeal of the convert, he inveighs against the dangers of artistic representation, especially erotica disguised as mythology, and the passion and frenzy it can inspire. Pasiphaë could never have made love with a bull and borne the Minotaur, he says, had there not been a skilled craftsman like Dædalus to make a bronze cow in which she could conceal herself. According to Clement, these ideas have spread dangerously and most people (read: the pagan Alexandrian upper class) have rejected modesty and respect for the gods altogether. This is demonstrated by their choice of interior decor:

They display in their homes the lustful embraces of their gods. People who reckon sexual excess to be piety, who are dedicated to licentiousness, ornament their bedrooms with small painted pictures, hanging up rather high, like offerings in a temple. While lying in bed in the midst of their sensual pleasures, they can feast their eyes on a naked Aphrodite locked in sexual union with Ares ... Nowadays, nobody is ashamed to look quite openly at pictures which show sexual postures of utter abandon: what is more, they treat them like votive offerings, as if they were the images of their gods. They

dedicate these monuments of shamelessness in their homes, and are as keen to have representations of the sexual poses of Philaenis as of the labours of Hercules.

Philaenis was a legendary prostitute, supposedly the author of a sex manual, the fragments of which are translated in [Chapter 5](#). For Clement, all this erotic art can have dangerous consequences:

I denounce not only those who do all this, but also those who like looking at it and hearing about it. Your ears become whores, your eyes prostitutes, your perception becomes an adulterer at the sight of these couplings.⁸

Clement is railing against the pictures of intercourse anciendy known as *symplegmata*, literally ‘knots’, which show two (or more) people writhing around in the throes of passion. The best-known examples of these are the paintings from Pompeii, which come from domestic interiors as well as brothels.⁹ Clement perhaps juxtaposes Hercules and Philaenis because paintings of the exploits of the mythic hero and the mythic whore would both have been characterised by intricate patterns of entwined limbs. Representations of Hercules battling against the triplebodied Geryon and Philaenis athletically taking on a client or clients would have obvious similarities.

I do not know of any actual examples of the erotic paintings Clement describes from Egypt. Examples may lurk unpublished in museum cupboards. However, the few pictorial papyri to have been published give some indication of how such wall paintings and pictures might have looked.¹⁰ Scholars have often taken these pieces of papyrus to be book illustrations. In fact, their dimensions make this theory unlikely, since they are far too large for the format of ancient books, and do not have associated passages of literary text. It is more likely that they are preliminary designs for wall paintings or large textiles, such as hangings. One example is the sketch for a *symplegma* of a satyr and mænad, the most hypersexual mythological beings (Plate 19). The other side of this papyrus preserves the letter written at Hermopolis in the third century CE, illustrated in Plate I.¹¹ There is no way of telling which side of the papyrus was inscribed first. Although badly damaged, the scene can be reconstructed from analogues, and is a well-known theme of mosaics and paintings from Pompeii. The satyr, naked and garlanded, grasps the struggling mænad with one hand round her breasts and the other around the waist: her back is towards him, but she looks him directly in the face. He is seated and trying to pull her on top of him. The mænad attempts to push away his enfolding thigh and erect penis with her right arm: her left arm, missing on the papyrus, would probably have been

extended, holding a graceful arc of drapery, imparting a sense of movement. In flight, the mænad's clothes have fallen in disarray around her. Apart from highlighting her nudity, this pose would have allowed the painter to experiment with the contrast in colour and texture between the smooth, pale flesh of the maenad's back and the dark, sun-burnt skin of the importunate satyr. A woman's exposed back is a frequent erotic focus in Roman paintings of lovers.¹² In the Pompeian versions of the satyr and mænad scene, the artists add props to heighten the feeling of flight, pursuit and resistance, such as the mænad's dropped sun-hat. The landscape background would probably have been sylvan and fairly impressionistic.

The next stage in the encounter between mænad and satyr is illustrated by the second century BCE mosaic floor from Tell Timai, the ancient Thmuis, in the Delta (Plate 20). The couple get in position for intercourse. The satyr pulls the mænad on top of him, locking her in place with his legs and chin. The mosaic artist, not an especially competent one, illustrates what the painter who realised the papyrus sketch would have done: he has differentiated the skin colours of the couple with dark stones for the satyr and pale ones for the maenad. This is partly an artistic exigency, since it makes the partners distinguishable instead of blending into an amorphous knot of arms and legs. The contrast also makes the woman more visible: her bare back, thighs and left breast, exposed as she raises her arm, are definitely the erotic foci of the scene.

To be surrounded by such images of sexual pursuit and dominance in a domestic context may seem disturbing, but I would rather not consider whether such images are pornographic *per se*. I prefer to see them as examples of how mythology was a cultural currency for buying into all aspects of life in the ancient world. Myths provided exciting paradigms for sexual activities in the same way that a frisson could be added to public executions by staging them as mythological 'charades', with the victims disguised as appropriate characters. The poet Ovid talks about mythological role-playing in sex — there is the 'Hector and Andromache position' (man on top), or the 'Milanion and Atlanta position' (woman's legs on man's shoulders).¹³ A ring-stone with lovers in the latter position was found at Damanhur in the Delta (Figure 13). Maybe ancient lovers had some appropriate name for the 'satyr and mænad position' in which, however unconsciously, wider ideas about the inequity of sexual relationships were mirrored in the private space of the bedroom.



Figure 13 Gemstone showing a couple making love in the ‘Milanion and Atlanta position’ from Damanhur in the Delta. (3rd century BCE)

A more allusive mythological treatment for a sexual scene is illustrated by the papyrus drawing of Eros and Psyche (PSI VIII 919) now in Florence ([Figure 14](#)). Like the satyr and mænad sketch, its large size (about 25 by 15 cm) and similarity¹⁴ to paintings from elsewhere in the Roman world suggest that it is a preparatory sketch for a drawing rather than a book illustration. It probably dates to the second century CE. Here both Eros and Psyche are depicted as pretty adolescents. Eros, languid and beardless, reclines on a dining-couch or bed with his left arm extended along the side of the couch, his right arm up towards his ivy-crowned head. He is bare-chested, his torso muscled but with a suggestion of the effete. His heavy-lidded eyes are turned to the left. Psyche, wearing butterfly wings, stands at the extreme right of the couch and extends her left arm towards Eros, handing something to him which is difficult to make out. It may be a mirror or, more probably, a lamp. She is fully clothed, though in statuary Eros and Psyche are often naked or partially clad. The scene has rather an intimate, enclosed feel to it, though this may be attributable to the truncated papyrus.

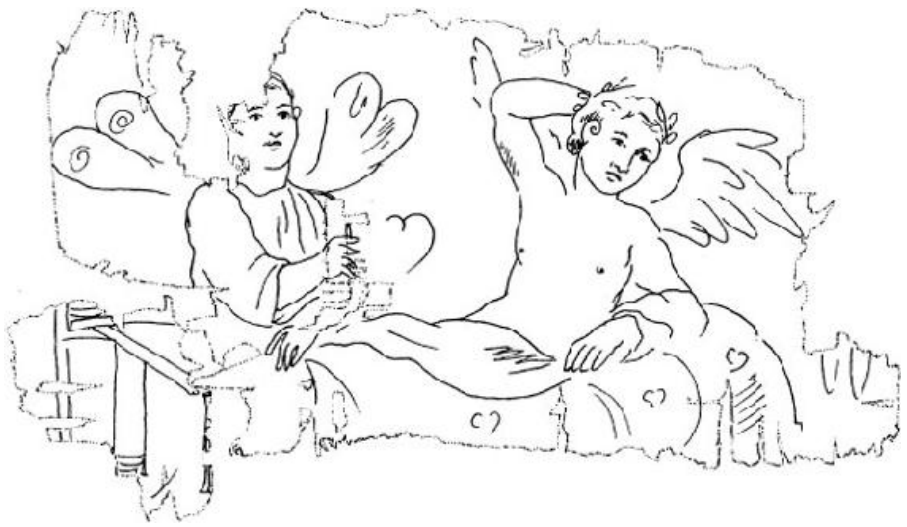


Figure 14 Sketch for a wall painting of Eros and Psyche from Oxyrhynchus. (PSI VIII 919, 2nd century CE: Florence, Vitelli Collection)

The myth of Eros and Psyche was a very popular one in the ancient world. Psyche, the beautiful daughter of a king, was so much revered that people neglected Aphrodite, who grew jealous. She sent Eros to make Psyche fall in love with the most unsuitable person he could find; but once he set eyes on her, Eros was smitten himself. Dressed as a bride, Psyche was transported to a palace where she was attended by invisible servants and, in due course, visited by an invisible Eros, who refuses to reveal himself to her. They consummate their marriage in a darkened bedchamber. Eros comes to visit her invisibly, and the couple continue to make love without Psyche ever seeing her bridegroom. Eventually her curiosity becomes too much for her. One night, while Eros lies asleep in their dark bedroom, Psyche lights a lamp and gazes on her husband — a beautiful divine youth. In her wonderment, she spills a drop of hot lamp-oil on his body: Eros awakes, and punishes her for not obeying him by throwing her out of the house. Psyche wanders the world, undergoing many tribulations, eventually to be re-united with Eros.

The hermeneutics of the myth's erotic meaning changed over time. It starts off as a metaphor for the soul seeking the ultimate union with the divine. Psyche's butterfly wings are a Pythagorean addition, to symbolise how her soul, reborn through knowledge, emerges like a chrysalis from a cocoon. In the Hellenistic period its symbolic value diminished, often being used as an artistic excuse to show scantily-clad adolescents kissing and embracing. With Christianity a new meaning is manufactured: the soul, purified from sin by divine love, receives eternal happiness. Whatever it may have meant to the

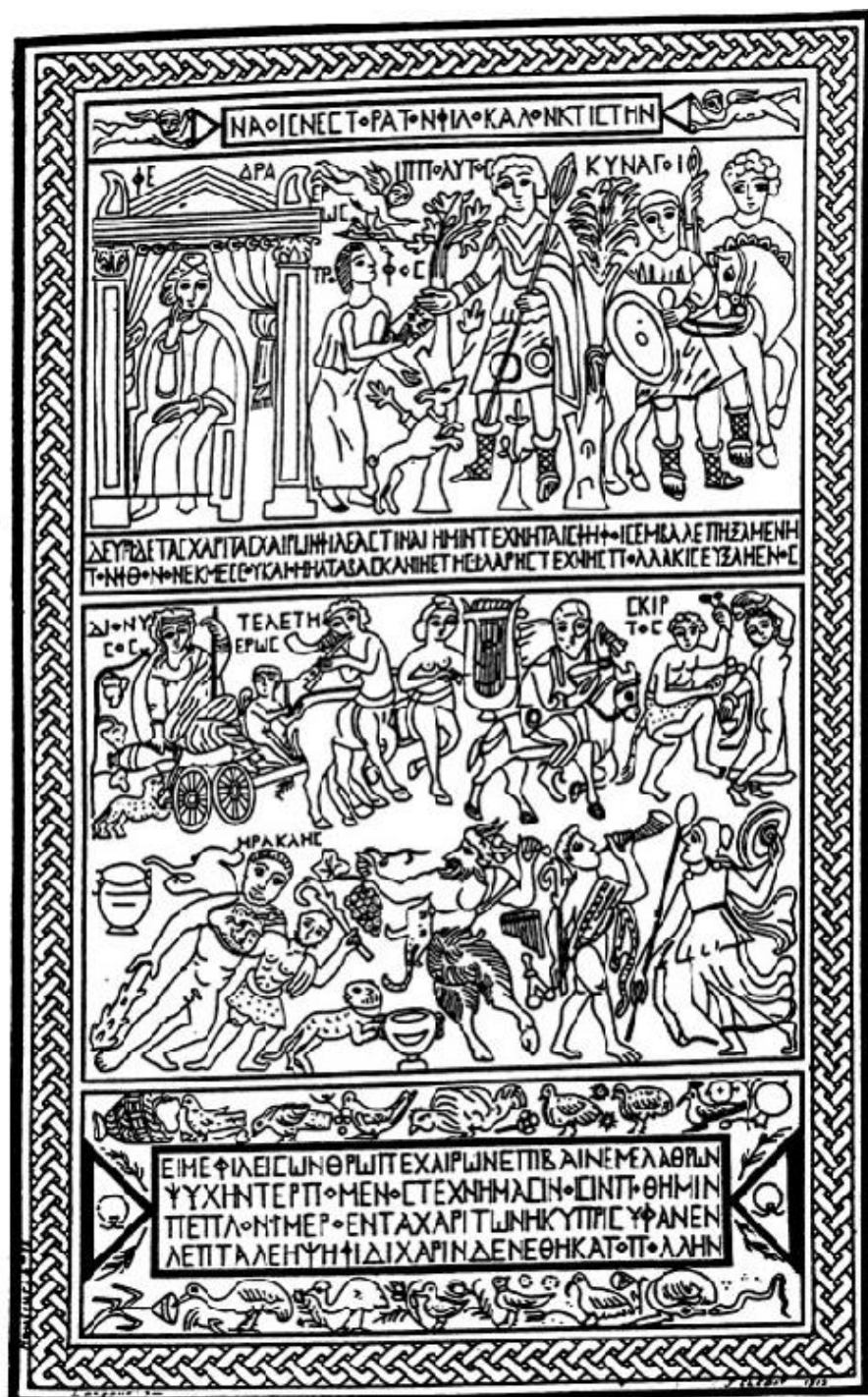
onlooker, the motif of Eros and Psyche recurs again and again on Egyptian artifacts, particularly terracotta figurines and lamps (Figure 15). The myth was a natural subject for ornamenting lamps, because they play such an important part in the tale. It has been suggested that lamps with erotic scenes were used to illuminate bedchambers or other private rooms, and if this is the case, the representation of Eros and Psyche on these lamps might take on an added erotic piquancy. A turning point of the story is Psyche's flickering oil-lamp voyeuristically illuminating Eros' slumbering, post-coital body in the darkness of their bedroom. It is a rare example from antiquity of the woman being in the more powerful position as the active observer of a passive, vulnerable male body — for which she is duly punished.



Figure 15 Discus of a lamp with Eros and Psyche kissing. (2nd century CE)

The jealousy of Aphrodite also underlies another work, which is perhaps the clearest expression of how the erotic charge of the visual was perceived in Egypt. This is a splendid mosaic floor discovered in 1913 near Sheikh Zouaid at the north-eastern extremity of Egypt¹⁵ (Figure 16). It probably dates to the late third or early fourth century, and is a large prestige work, 4.75 by 3 metres, situated in one of the public rooms of a wealthy person's seaside villa. Although it is difficult to tell from the very gnomonic plan supplied by the excavator, the room with the mosaic was probably the *triclinium* or dining-room,

the place where the owner of the house publicly displayed his power and wealth.



In the lower scene of the mosaic there is a Bacchic revel, with Dionysus triumphant and his usual entourage of *mænads*, Silenus, and others.¹⁶ More interesting is the upper register of the mosaic, showing an episode from the story of Phædra, the sister of Ariadne and the second wife of Theseus. In Euripides' version of the myth, Aphrodite resolved to punish Hippolytus, the virginal son of Theseus, for not worshipping her. She inspired Phædra, Hippolytus' step-mother, with an incestuous passion for the boy. When he refuses her advances, she writes a letter to Theseus falsely accusing Hippolytus of seducing her, and commits suicide. Everything ends destructively. Hippolytus is cursed by his father and eventually dies in a horrible accident.

The scene shown in the mosaic is where Hippolytus spurns the love Phædra, who is sitting in the palace at the left. She is modestly veiled and detached from the action, her apparent demureness and composure contrasting with the passions raging inside her. Phædra's nurse tries to hand Hippolytus the fateful letter: he stands in the middle, accompanied by a band of hunting cronies at the far right, with Eros hovering above, about to transfix him with a love arrow. But Hippolytus is not interested, and rejects the enclosed world of women and sexual relations for the outdoors, and the sexless joys of the all-male hunt. The composition of the mosaic, with the male and female characters segregated yet linked by the fluttering Eros, encapsulates the idea that women and men inhabit different sexual universes as far as passion is concerned. The fate of Phædra and Hippolytus is a cautionary tale of what happens when sex and passion are allowed to go to extremes. Phædra abandons wifely sexual control, and Hippolytus disdains sex altogether, both symbolising polarities of unacceptable sexual behaviour in women and men. *Prima facie*, the story of Phædra and Hippolytus is a parable for perpetuating the ideal of sexual *sôphrosynê*.

Yet Hippolytus is an odd choice as central figure for this kind of mosaic. Depictions of mythological figures associated with hunting, such as Meleager or Bellerephon, are not uncommon in late Roman mosaics from wealthy houses elsewhere in the empire.¹⁷ However, the ideology behind these mosaics seems to be of the 'heroic host', based on an identification of the villa owner with the hero. Hippolytus, the hapless, virginal victim of Eros and Aphrodite, is not an obvious kind of hero with whom a provincial magnate would wish to be identified. It seems to me that in the general decoration of this important room, the emphasis lies on Aphrodite herself, although she is not actually depicted in the mosaic. Two large, raked statues of the goddess were

found in adjoining rooms, probably part of a sculpture collection that would have ornamented the triclinium. Most cogent to the decor's connections with Aphrodite, however, are the poems in the lower two bands of inscriptions which unite the pictorial areas of the mosaic:

Look here with delight, my friend, at the charming scenes which Art has laid down for us in stones, praying as she did so that Envy and the Evil Eye would keep away from her joyful craft. If you love me, friend, come now with delight into this room, with your soul rejoicing at the artifice which the Goddess of Love has woven for us, putting a lot of charm into it – a web of desire in these delicate stones.¹⁸

Aphrodite, then, is the instigator of everything in this room, not merely of the erotic inspiration that brought about the deaths of Phædra and Hippolytus, but also of their representation on this particular floor. As well as being the protagonist, she is also physically present in the room in statue form. On surface value, the myth of Phædra might seem more of an exhortation to sexual self-control than an incitement to think about erotic pleasure, but this is not necessarily how it was viewed in antiquity. Lucian, for instance, says that the story of Phædra is the erotic myth *par excellence* for dramatic interpretation, since it gives performers the maximum scope to display their talents for interpreting sexual passions.¹⁹ If one considers this, then the invitation in the inscription is for the viewer to enjoy the environment physically, to think about the decor of the room in sexual terms. Whatever the meaning of the Sheikh Zouaid mosaic as a statement of the owner's political power and authority, for the viewer in antiquity it was also replete with sexual meanings.

A large mosaic like this was an expensive way of decorating an interior, only available to the élite. But many more affordable objects were also part of the culture of sex. I am thinking here of the myriad minor everyday things encompassed by the untranslatable Yiddish word *tsatskes*: lamps, figurines, plaques, engraved semiprecious stones for mounting in jewellery, carved bone inlays for furniture, pottery and glass vessels. All of these household and personal items could be decorated with three-dimensional erotic images, which would have been scattered everywhere around the domestic space. As Paul Veyne has said, 'whether at Ephesus in Turkey or Karanis in Egypt, modern visitors are invariably surprised by the ubiquitous presence of art and images.'²⁰ Like the luxury prestige items, these minor arts are often decorated with mythological figures, since myth provided an all-encompassing frame of reference for ordinary experience. As with erotic wall-paintings, Clement of Alexandria has plenty to say about *tsatskes* and the potential danger of being surrounded by them.

Clement's stance on these objects is predicated upon a strikingly familiar identification of the viewer with the erotic image. To him, exposure to any artefact that depicts sex or has a sexual inference is a stimulus to uncontrolled sexual behaviour:

These are the kind of frenzies that wicked craftsmanship creates in people who do not think. Men who look after apes have noticed with surprise that they cannot be deceived by wax or clay figures; so are you inferior to apes when you prize little images of stone, wood, gold, or ivory, and pictures as well? ... On the bezels of your signet-rings [craftsmen] depict the bird who lusts after women, flying around Leda, and you accept this image, and stamp them on the bindings of letters, using the licentiousness of Zeus as a seal... they also have other images of the same kind: Pan and his entourage, naked girls, drunken satyrs and phalli, all of them laid bare in pictures, crying out their lack of discipline.²¹

A selection of the kind of things that so concerned him is shown in Plates 21, 22 and 23. These are all unpublished terracottas in the reserve collections of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London. They are representative of the kinds of erotic images found among the minor arts of Egypt, and could be paralleled in many museum collections. Most of them are unprovenanced, or only have very sketchy information about their find spots. Objects begin to lose their meaning when divorced from specific contexts of production and use, and devoid of any archaeological context it is difficult to make much of any of these figures. One can only guess at what purpose or purposes they were intended to have, and what it would have been like to touch them, use them and have them lying around in one's house. The winged phallus, with its suspension hole, may have been a votive offering or hung up in a doorway to avert ill luck. Similar items were found at Pompeii, sometimes equipped with bells to add another sensory dimension to the magical protection. Like the phallus, the statuette of the plump (or pregnant) woman fingering her vagina is equipped with a hole to hang up the figure. This suggests that it may also have been an *ex voto* in a shrine, but given its small size it could even have been worn on the body. As for the terracotta plaque showing a man entering a woman as she lies on her side, suckling a child, it is a good example of the polyvalency of erotic images, especially when taken out of context. Presumably it cannot represent an actual event or fantasy. One could regard it as objectifying a wish for fertility: the intercourse between the couple will lead to pregnancy, symbolised by the presence of the suckling child during love-making. Alternatively, it would be possible

to see the plaque as a purely erotic object with no religious connotations. The man is entering the woman from the rear, while they both lie on their sides, apparently a very bad position for conception. The suckling child may refer to the belief, well known in Egypt, that lactation will suppress a woman's fertility. So it would be just as easy to interpret the image as a wish for recreational sex rather than a fertility offering.

This plaque of the couple making love on a bed may be related iconographically to the fragmentary limestone figurines from Memphis showing women being penetrated by multiple men.²² There are a number of these in the Petrie Museum: all are very broken up, but Plate 24 gives an idea of their subject matter. Here a man copulates with a woman in the 'missionary position', whilst a third figure, whose gender is uncertain, raises up the legs of the male. On the other side of the group (not illustrated) the woman fondles a young child wearing the lock of youth. Another example,²³ too broken to illustrate, shows a woman being penetrated rectally and vaginally at the same time: her hands clasp the phallus entering her anus, and the other phallus with her calves as she straddles the two men. Only stumps of the phalli remain: the woman's navel and nipples are accentuated with red dots. Another group of limestone figures shows naked women down on all fours, their backsides in the air, while men make love to them from behind: whether anally or vaginally is impossible to say. The women are adorned with anklets, bracelets and body-chains, added in red paint.

These *symplegmata* with multiple figures always represent one woman being taken by several men simultaneously. Again, the interpretation of this is dependent on an irrecoverable context. If these objects are related to recreational sex, if they were brothel ornaments for instance, their imagery may represent male fantasy. They could even be read as asserting the primacy of the phallus and heterosexual intercourse, because only one woman is represented. The presence of another woman in the *symplegma* might create an uncomfortable (for men) sexual ambiguity, as in contemporary images of group sex.²⁴ On the other hand, there is the frequent association of a young child with the adult sexual partners. Is this an accurate reflection of reality, in a world where many sexual acts must have taken place in cramped conditions with other people present? Or is the child an apparition of the desired outcome to the sexual act? Devoid of any context, it is impossible to know. These little figurines say comparatively little about the actualities of sexual life in Græco-Roman Egypt.

However, one must be wary about overestimating the symbolism of objects which seem to have sexual meanings. Some of them are probably little more than vehicles for crude humour, like the lamp in

the shape of the satyr Silenus in Plate 25-Viewed from above as one fills the lamp, the satyr Silenus holds two pots, one on his stomach (the filling hole) and one between his feet (the nozzle for the wick). When placed on a flat surface and seen from the side, however, Silenus seems to be equipped with a huge phallus, topped by a burning wick when the lamp was alight. It is hard to think that this phallic lamp was designed with any intention more profound than to amuse.

Clement regards domestic trivia like the Silenus lamps as dangerous objects, because of the sexual acts their imagery might incite people to imitate. Apart from the Christian axe he is grinding, he is also motivated by a very Platonic distrust of the visual arts. The painter, like the poet, appeals to an incorrigibly base part of the soul. As Plato says in *The Republic*, nothing can be done about the base except to restrain it, and whatever speaks directly to it should be banned.

Clement was to have his way. With Christianity, the phalli, the *symplegmata* figures, the erotic wall-paintings and mosaics stopped being produced in Egypt. People were no longer confronted with reminders of their erotic selves when they performed daily tasks like lighting a lamp or sealing a document with a ring-stone. In the new ideology, explicitly sexual matters belonged to a dangerous and irredeemably pagan world. The disappearance of erotic *tsatskes* marks the end of this survey, as Græco-Roman Egypt gradually transforms into early Christians Egypt.

1 I am sure that this situation is paralleled in many other museums worldwide: see Martin (1987)-

2 For further elaboration of this, see Richlin (1992) *passim*.

3 The role of Pompeii in the growth of pornography as a category in the nineteenth century is analysed by Kendrick (1987) 1–32.

4 Discussed fully in [Chapter 2](#).

5 *Palatine Anthology* XII 190.

6 Papyrological evidence for interior decoration is discussed by Daszewski (1985) 95–7-He suggests that schemes were planned by consultation between artists and clients, but were also dependent to some extent on standard pattern books.

7 For excellent discussions of erotic painting in Roman domestic contexts, see Myerowitz in Richlin (1992) 131–57 and Clarke in Gazda (1991) 89–104.

8 Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IV 57–61.4, excerpted.

9 For references, see Myerowitz (1992) 133; these (and others) sumptuously illustrated in Varone (1994).

10 Dr Helen Whitehouse, of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, is currently working on a corpus of pictorial papyri from Oxyrhynchus.

11 Some doubts have been expressed about the authenticity of the drawing, though the letter is certainly genuine (Dr Helen Whitehouse, personal communication). I have examined the surface of the papyrus closely, but cannot find any definite evidence for it being a fake. Ink analysis may hold the key. The drawing is published here for the first time.

- 12 See Varone (1994) *passim*.
- 13 Ovid, *Art of Love* III 775–8.
- 14 It is reminiscent of two paintings of Eros and Psyche banqueting in the house of Marcus Lucretius Fronto at Pompeii.
- 15 Full publication of the mosaic by Clédat (1915) 24–8.
- 16 The Dionysiac procession may have been inspired by actual processions at public festivals: see Kondoleon in Gazda (1991) 112 and nn. 35–6.
- 17 See Ellis in Gazda (1991) 123–30.
- 18 The text of the poems is in Bernand (1969) no. 122.
- 19 Lucian, *On the Dance* 2: interestingly, one of the other supremely erotic subjects for ballets is that of the prostitute Rhodopis, whose Egyptian metamorphoses are discussed in [Chapter 5](#).
- 20 Veyne (1987) 317.
- 21 Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* IV 58–60, excerpted.
- 22 Inventory numbers UC 38350–54, UC 33447, UC 33476, UC 35953–5. There are also uncatalogued examples of similar figures.
- 23 Inventory number UC 38350.
- 24 Discussed in Segal and McIntosh (1992) 126.

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